

Schools as Sites of Social Reproduction: Student Interactions in Diverse Secondary Schools in Nigeria

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Source: *Journal on Education in Emergencies*, Vol. 10, No. 1 (February 2025), pp. 120-152

Published by: Inter-agency Network for Education in Emergencies

Stable URL: <http://hdl.handle.net/2451/74859>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33682/wvez-r8wy>

REFERENCES:

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Salmon-Letelier, Marlana, and S. Garnett Russell. 2025. "Schools as Sites of Social Reproduction: Student Interactions in Diverse Secondary Schools in Nigeria." *Journal on Education in Emergencies* 10 (1): 120-52. <https://doi.org/10.33682/wvez-r8wy>.

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SCHOOLS AS SITES OF SOCIAL REPRODUCTION: STUDENT INTERACTIONS IN DIVERSE SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN NIGERIA

MARLANA SALMON-LETELIER AND S. GARNETT RUSSELL

ABSTRACT

In this study, we explore intergroup relations and student interactions in eight diverse secondary schools in Nigeria over one academic year. We use mixed methods and a social network analysis of these interactions and relationships to highlight the perspectives of students within a divided society. We analyze data from student interviews we conducted and social network data from our student surveys to explore the ways students exhibit ethnic and religious relations in a school setting. This study finds that Hausa Muslims are the most segregated group within Federal Unity Colleges in Nigeria, driven by the intersection of religion, ethnicity, and language. Religion emerges as a stronger social boundary than ethnicity. Our findings also point to the importance of both academic and nonacademic spaces (such as dormitories, where students can separate into groups) in mediating student interactions. Our work contributes to the discourse in the fields of education, conflict, and peacebuilding and, more broadly, to discussions in comparative education about the role schools play in mitigating or exacerbating intergroup conflict.

INTRODUCTION

Schools play a powerful role as socializing institutions (Abowitz and Harnish 2006; Hess and Torney-Purta 2005; Russell and Bajaj 2015) that teach young people how to engage with their identities in relation to one another. Research on education and conflict has explored how schooling can exacerbate intergroup inequalities and, conversely, how it can lead to positive outcomes in various contexts (Bush and Saltarelli 2000; Salmon-Letelier 2022b). Other studies have examined the construction of racial/ethnic identities and related power asymmetries in school settings in postconflict

Received April 9, 2022; revised September 26, 2023, and October 7, 2024; accepted December 16, 2024; electronically published February 2025.

Journal on Education in Emergencies, Vol. 10, No. 1.

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ISSN 2518-6833

and divided societies, such as South Africa and Cyprus (Ferreira 2016; Zembylas 2010). While several studies have investigated the relationship between religion and educational outcomes (Alesina et al. 2023; Manglos-Weber 2017; Dev, Mberu, and Pongou 2016), few have considered how religion coincides with ethnic identity to shape the experiences of students at school (for exceptions, see Abu El-Haj 2015; Branford 2021; Komatsu 2019; Wang 2018). In this study, however, we examine the intersection of religion and ethnic identity and the compounded influence they have on students' school experiences and intergroup friendships. Because students grapple with their cultural and societal identities during adolescence (Erikson 1968), we focus specifically on the intergroup dynamics among secondary students from different ethnic and religious groups, through which conflict in the school context either manifests or is tempered (Esses et al. 2005).

In this study, we focus on federal unity colleges (FUCs), which are integrated secondary boarding schools in Nigeria whose students are from different ethnic and religious groups. Nigeria, a nation with more than 250 ethnic groups, has a history of colonization that has resulted in instability, conflict, and complex political group categorizations that overlap across ethnic, religious, regional, and socioeconomic lines (Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). We also refer to state schools, which are neither boarding schools nor intentionally designed to integrate students from diverse backgrounds.¹

The data used in this article come from a mixed methods research study based on extensive fieldwork in eight secondary schools in Nigeria—six FUCs and two state schools—over one academic year. We analyze data from interviews and surveys we conducted to explore the ways students exhibit their ethnic and religious relations in a school setting. While we collected data in both state schools and FUCs, we focus on the latter, given their boarding school environment and their mandate to ensure an ethnically and religiously diverse student population. The aim of this mandate is to foster positive interactions among diverse students outside school hours. We ask the following questions: How do students' ethnic and religious identities shape their interactions with other students? How do students understand the role of ethnic and religious identity in their school experiences? To what extent do certain ethnic and religious groups experience greater exclusion and/or discrimination than others?

This paper presents students' viewpoints on their interactions with other students, and their intergroup interactions and relationships within their school environment in a divided society. Our findings point to the importance of student identity and of academic and nonacademic school practices and spaces—classrooms, school dormitories, religious spaces, common areas—in influencing the extent to which students feel either included or excluded. Our findings also underscore the significance

1 While we briefly reference state schools for context, it is important to note that a more comprehensive analysis of this comparison can be found in other papers (Salmon-Letelier 2022a, 2022b).

of these school spaces in mediating student interactions by privileging certain aspects of ethnic, religious, and linguistic identity (Salmon-Letelier 2022a). This research contributes to the discourse in the fields of education, conflict resolution, and peacebuilding, and enriches the broader conversation in comparative education by shedding light on the pivotal role schools play in mitigating or exacerbating intergroup conflict.

We begin this article with a review of the literature on diverse schools in conflict settings, followed by an extensive exploration of the Nigerian context. We then introduce a conceptual framework that combines self-categorization and social reproduction theories, which provides the foundation for our subsequent discussions of our methods, findings, and conclusions.

DIVERSE SCHOOLS IN CONFLICT SETTINGS

Schools with ethnically and religiously diverse populations have a unique influence on their students' interactions (Knifsend, Bell, and Juvonen 2017; Malsbary 2016). Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam (2010) describe schools as "social laboratories" in which daily interactions among diverse students reflect broader intergroup relations. Integrated schools, in which students from historically conflicted groups study in one setting, are considered a positive intervention for improving intergroup social relations (Stringer et al. 2009). Schools with a diverse and integrated student body offer a lens through which to examine the role education plays in contexts of intergroup conflict.

Studies on integrated schools emphasize the benefits these schools provide, including academic advantages (Lucker et al. 1976); preparation for postschooling diversity, such as increased comfort in diverse settings (Holme, Wells, and Revilla 2005); positive effects on identity, intergroup attitudes, forgiveness, and reconciliation (McGlynn et al. 2004); and promotion of interracial relationships (Burns 2012; Holtman et al. 2005). In a qualitative study conducted in a Serb-majority school in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Komatsu (2019) found that Bosniak Muslim students recognized the value studying in an integrated learning environment had on forming friendships and intergroup trust with Serbian students. Several studies have examined the racial, religious, and linguistic integration of schools in postapartheid South Africa (Soudien and Sayed 2003; Soudien 2010; Holtman et al. 2005). Holtman et al. (2005) conducted a survey of students from different racial groups in formerly segregated schools in Cape Town. They found that an increase in both in-school and out-of-school contact with students from different racial groups was associated with positive attitudes toward other groups.

While many of these studies point to the positive benefits of diversity and integrated schools, other studies have critiqued the assumption of positive benefits. Irwin (1991) challenged the notion that integrated schooling is universally positive, noting that positive social integration is more difficult in certain contexts because of societal and cultural factors and school policies. Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam (2010) confirmed Irwin's notion in their analysis of the IEA 1999 Civic Education Study data, in which they explored 3,000 Swedish high school students' attitudes toward ethnic diversity and civic knowledge. They found that, while ethnic diversity is negatively related to students' civic knowledge overall, ethnic diversity at school is positively related to immigrant students' attitudes on group rights.

Organizational structures, school policies, and school practices around integration and discrimination can influence how students understand their relationship to others in both positive and negative ways. Scholars discuss the importance of integrating schools strategically and note that integration is not an inevitable solution for improving social relations (Gurin, Nagda, and Lopez 2004). For example, McGlynn and Bekerman's (2007) study of diverse schools in Israel and Northern Ireland found that students have issues with learning about and recognizing diverse groups in the school setting. While diversity is often assumed to improve students' attitudes and views toward other groups (Chang 2002), it also may contribute to further division, especially in schools in conflict settings, where intergroup relations may already be contentious (Andreouli, Howarth, and Sonn 2014; McLaren 1995). Bekerman and Nir (2006) also observed these tensions in Palestinian-Jewish schools that attempted to balance the celebration of historical days that Jewish students widely viewed as positive, while Palestinian students memorialized them as violent. Tolomelli (2015) explored discriminatory school practices in Bosnia and Herzegovina that were born of conflict and continued to cause division among ethnic and religious groups.

It is important to take context into account when considering how to integrate students effectively (Janmaat 2012). For example, Janmaat (2012) used data from the IEA 1999 Civic Education Study to explore the relations between ethnic and racial diversity in classrooms, tolerance related to ethnicity, and political participation in Germany, Sweden, and England. The study found that increased ethnic tolerance is related to classroom diversity in Germany and Sweden but not in England. The authors suggest that practices within the school and contextual factors outside, such as a country's history of immigration or cultural norms around liberalism and multiculturalism, may shape the effects diverse education settings have on students. Soudien and Sayed's (2003) study of inclusion in 12 South African schools found that the way schools address inclusion at the institutional policy level—such as language policy and school governance—also influences how students experience inclusion or exclusion in terms of race, language, and social class.

Social psychologists argue that intergroup contact like that in integrated schools reduces prejudice across groups (Burns 2012; Ellison and Powers 1994; Pettigrew and Tropp 2006; Williams Jr. 1947). In their study of a diverse group of South African students, Holtman et al. (2005) found that intergroup contact among the students both in and outside of school was an important factor in improved intergroup attitudes. In Nigeria, intergroup contact has been found to reduce discriminatory behaviors but not deeply held prejudices among young men in a short-term vocational training program (Scacco and Warren 2018). Intergroup contact can promote positive relations, but only under certain conditions, including between groups of equal status in a given situation, shared goals, intergroup cooperation, and support from authorities, such as teachers (Allport 1954; Kokkonen, Esaiasson, and Gilljam 2010; Pettigrew 1998; Thijs and Verkuyten 2014). Moreover, the degree of diversity may influence the effectiveness of intergroup contact in improving social relations (Spivak et al. 2015).

Our study explores the perspective of students in Nigeria who lived together during two formative periods—the first year and final year in a boarding school setting. Our mixed methods study, which includes the perspectives of the students we interviewed and surveyed, builds on existing research on the relations between education and religion, ethnicity, and school integration. We highlight multiple factors that overlap in education settings—ethnicity, religion, and language—and how these factors can influence exclusion or inclusion among student groups. These factors are not well explored in the existing literature.

THE NIGERIAN CASE

One of Africa's most deeply divided nations, Nigeria has grappled with profound challenges related to national unity, democratization, and stability (Moland 2015; Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The country is characterized by three major ethnic groups—the Hausa-Fulani (27%), Yoruba (14%), and Igbo (14%), each of which is marked by significant internal diversity (CIA 2018)—plus more than 250 smaller ethnic groups. Nigeria has an almost equal proportion of Christians and Muslims. Neither holds a clear majority, which generates concern among citizens that one group may gain dominance over the other (Campbell 2013; Paden 2008). Throughout Nigeria's history, the potential for one ethnic or religious group to dominate others has ignited conflicts, such as the Biafran War in the late 1960s, the effects of which continue to reverberate today (Mustapha 2004).

Nigeria's current multistate federalism has fostered intergroup instability and conflict between the northern and southern regions of the country. Longstanding economic and educational disparities between the regions are exacerbated by the government's reliance on oil revenues and resources (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). These factors have deepened ethnoreligious tensions and undermined

efforts to promote national “unity,” a term frequently invoked by politicians, education institutions, and the media (Moland 2015; Paden 2008). Since 1999, Nigeria has lost at least 13,500 lives in ethnoreligious conflicts (Campbell 2013). In 2018 alone, the extremist group Boko Haram killed more than 1,200 people and displaced more than 200,000 in northeastern Nigeria (Human Rights Watch 2018).

Britain’s colonial policy, which partitioned the country into three primary ethnic groups and regions, contributed to the present-day socioeconomic and educational disparities between the north and south. The predominantly Hausa population in the northern regions often lags behind the more affluent and better educated Igbo population in the southern regions (Fafunwa 1974; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). For example, the south has more economic and cultural connections with the West and higher-quality education (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). This has created an imbalanced tripartite federal structure that, coupled with inconsistent policies across the regions, has fueled ethnoregional polarization and a “bi-polar north-south confrontation” (Osaghae and Suberu 2005, 16).

Colonial policy also shaped the present-day overlapping of ethnic and religious identities that correspond with geographic regions (Mustapha 1986; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The Hausa, for example, are predominantly Muslim and live in the north, whereas the predominantly Christian Igbos reside mainly in the southeast. The Yoruba, who live primarily in the southwest, are both Christian and Muslim. This more flexible connection between their ethnic and religious affiliations enables Yoruba students to serve as intermediaries between the polarized Igbo and Hausa students.

FEDERAL UNITY COLLEGES

Nigeria’s Federal Unity Colleges were of particular interest when we chose the location for this research. The FUCs were originally established in 1964 with the aim of uniting Nigerians in the midst of political tensions across ethnic, religious, and regional divides (Okoro 2015). The stated goal of these schools is to promote “national unity and integration of students and staff of diverse cultures and religions of Nigeria” (“Unity Spotlight” 2013, 4). FUCs are federally run secondary boarding schools that use entrance exams and a nationwide quota system to select an ethnically representative student body.² The quota system allows students from states with fewer educational opportunities to enter FUCs with lower than required scores. This approach shapes the ethnoreligious composition of the student body. In contrast, state secondary schools were not designed with the same intention and do not use a quota system, and the state schools included in this study were not boarding schools. There are currently 104 FUCs across Nigeria, including at least one all-boy and one all-girl FUC in each state. Unity is not the main motivator for students who apply

2 The quota system allows a certain number of students from each state to enter the schools.

to the FUCs. For one thing, the fees are partly subsidized by the government, which makes them more desirable than the state schools. Some FUCs are considered more prestigious than others, which also motivates many students to apply.

Due to the current security issues caused by Boko Haram, not all FUC student bodies accurately reflect the regions' diverse ethnic groups, as many parents are hesitant to send their children to schools in areas experiencing frequent violence or those too far from home. However, schools in Abuja and Lagos are desirable and well-integrated in terms of ethnicity, region, and religion.

Positioning our research in the context of schools that are striving to embrace diverse student bodies in a historically divided nation gave us a valuable opportunity to delve into the students' experiences in a distinctive environment. Although using a quota system for purposes of inclusion is not a prevalent practice in other conflict and postconflict settings, it does offer a unique window into the dynamics at play in diverse schools. This perspective enables us to explore how students navigate diversity, could influence how FUCs and other diverse schools are structured, and, ultimately, could promote positive interactions among diverse groups.

CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK: SELF-CATEGORIZATION AND SOCIAL REPRODUCTION THEORIES

We draw from self-categorization and social reproduction theory to gain an understanding of the intergroup dynamics in a diverse school setting. Self-categorization theory involves assumptions and hypotheses about one's self-conception vis-à-vis other people—that is, a social interaction. It expands on the more simplistic notion of intergroup contact by considering the psychological formation of groups and the influence group membership has on behavior (Turner et al. 1987). Turner et al. (1987) define these self-categorizations as the “cognitive groups of oneself and some class of stimuli as the same (identical, similar, equivalent, interchangeable, and so on) in contrast to some other class of stimuli” (p. 44). When students from various ethnic and religious groups are brought together in a new setting, they will engage in a self-categorization process based on perceived similarities and differences, many of which have been formed in the students' homes, communities, and friendship circles. School interventions that seek to either unite these groups (e.g., citizenship or national unity education practices) or increase their mutual appreciation (e.g., multicultural education practices) can influence their self-categorizations. Practices such as inclusive interreligious prayers that shape how students view various in-groups and out-groups can alter their attraction to an entire group or how connected they feel to Nigeria as a nation (Holtman et al. 1998).

This issue of how groups interact and how this shapes their ties to the nation becomes particularly important in a nation like Nigeria, where strong ethnic and religious categories make it easy for students to self-categorize into groups with strong ethnic/religious boundaries that shape the way they identify with being “Nigerian” (Fanon 1963; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). When an individual self-categorizes into various groups, their perceptions of the groups will interact with each other (Turner et al. 1987). For example, if a person is strongly tied to a particular ethnicity, it might interfere with their self-categorization as Nigerian. In secondary schools with mixed ethnic and religious populations, the salience of these categories could inhibit school unity and magnify nationwide group categorizations (Bekerman and Maoz 2005; Carter 2012; Donnelly 2004). Conversely, ethnically and religiously integrated schools present an opportunity to reform self-categorizations or to restructure what it means psychologically to be a part of the in-group or the out-group (McGlynn et al. 2004).

Students must learn to navigate where they place themselves within a diverse student population. This means they have to confront their own prejudices and the possibly conflicting messages about their school’s efforts to encourage national unity and appreciation of diversity (Turner et al. 1987). Changes in students’ identity formation that result from these efforts could affect how they relate to one another and shift their self-perceptions as being within or outside of various groups. This kind of change in students’ perceptions could lead to multiple outcomes, such as friendships with those from other religious groups or positive interactions with those of other ethnicities. We give this further consideration as a part of this study (Pettigrew 1998).

Identity formation and self-categorizations can persist or change in response to external influences, such as school. Bourdieu and Passeron (1990) view education as a means of reproducing existing social structures, such as intergroup relationships and hierarchies, through the curriculum, school practices, and informal interactions. Bourdieu’s (1977) concepts of habitus (ingrained social habits and perceptions) and field (spaces of interaction) suggest the potential to bring about social transformation by disrupting existing structures and intergroup relations (Bush and Saltarelli 2000). This can occur, intentionally or not, via the formal and informal school curriculum and practices, and through the creation of new understandings and relationships by the students and school personnel. At the FUCs, whose quota system brings together students with historically tense relations in the intimate living conditions of a boarding school, normal social situations have already been disrupted. They have been replaced by situations in which students, teachers, and administrators can engage in ways that either reinforce the existing habitus, such as groups self-segregating in the dormitories, or shape a new habitus that fosters social transformation, such as the development of intergroup friendships and crossing ethnic lines to bond over shared interests. In this article, we focus primarily on divisions within the school by exploring their implications and how the school can be reshaped to address them.

In this research, we view students as active participants in formal and informal school practices—school activities, dormitory assignments, disciplinary practices, and so on. These practices influence the ways students navigate boundaries. Changes in student perceptions can lead to various outcomes, including both social reproduction and social transformation (Pettigrew 1998). We argue that the compound effects of ethnicity, religion, and student perceptions are shaped within the school setting and that these multiple dynamics play a key role in marginalizing certain groups while keeping others in positions of power.

METHODS

To explore the ways identity formation and self-categorization shape relationships between students, we engage in mixed methods research involving interviews and surveys that gather social network analysis data on students from eight secondary schools (6 FUCs and 2 state) in Nigeria over one academic year (2017-2018). Lower secondary school includes the junior sections, JS1, JS2, and JS3; senior secondary school includes the senior sections, SS1, SS2, and SS3.³ Due to limited time and resources, we could not follow JS1 students for the full six years of secondary school, so we instead surveyed first- and final-year students at the start and end of one academic year. Our aim was to understand how the students changed in terms of friendships and their views of various groups throughout the year. We compared the first-year students to the final-year students, who had been in the integrated school setting for a longer time. This provided a snapshot of the students' development within a short timeframe.

In this paper, we focus our analysis on the FUCs, due to their immersive boarding school environment, but we also briefly mention the state schools for contextual and comparative purposes. The interview data captures the students' perspectives on intergroup interactions during their identity formation process, while the social network analysis provides a practical representation of the way these relationships map visually.

This research involved a purposive selection of eight schools: six FUCs and two state secondary schools. Due to the current security situation in Nigeria, the FUCs are not all representative of the variety of ethnic groups in that nation. Moreover, many parents do not want to send their kids to school in areas that are experiencing active violence or are far away from home. This research was conducted in two areas where the student bodies are highly diverse: Nigeria's capital, Abuja, and its largest city, Lagos. Both cities have three FUCs, one each all female, all male, and mixed sex.

3 These are approximately equivalent to grades 7-12 in the United States.

We conducted the research at these six schools and at one mixed-sex state secondary school in each area, which provided a comparison.

This study uses pseudonyms and identification numbers to protect the names of participants and to mask information that could reveal their identities. All participants signed an informed consent form, as approved by the Institutional Review Board at Teachers College, Columbia University.

SURVEY AND SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

We used a paper survey to gather data on students' tolerance, friendship networks, national/ethnic/religious identity, and relationship to the school. In this article, we focus on the friendship network portion of the survey, which enabled us to map the students' social networks. The first author surveyed the same JS1 (first-year) and SS3 (final-year) students at each school in the first and final months of the school year. A total of 643 students took the survey, including 502 FUC students and 141 state secondary school students. This included 309 SS3 students and 334 JS1 students, or approximately 40 SS3 and 40 JS1 students per school. Only 622 of the surveys were included in the analysis, due to missing information on important questions. See Table 1 for a description of the survey sample. The surveys were conducted separately within each classroom to facilitate its administration, the tracking of students over time, and the social network analysis.

Using the data analysis program R, the first author began the social network analysis by asking the students to write down the names of their five closest friends in the classroom. We asked this question at the beginning and the end of the school year in order to track any changes in patterns over time, which enabled us to conduct a detailed social network analysis that we tracked by classroom. Social network theory hypothesizes that an actor's position in a network can help to predict outcomes for that individual, including their behavior and beliefs, and that what happens to a group is partly a result of the way its members are connected with each other (Borgatti, Everett, and Johnson 2018). Social network analysis enables an in-depth examination of interpersonal relationships within a classroom while providing a means to triangulate and visually represent the social networks and relationships discussed during the interviews.

Table 1: Description of Survey Sample (N=622)

	Unity (n=483)	State (n=139)
Sex (%)		
Female	56.73	50.36
Male	43.27	49.64
Ethnicity (%)		
Yoruba	28.99	46.76
Hausa	7.25	4.32
Igbo	41.41	27.34
Other	22.35	21.58
Religion (%)		
Muslim	17.39	28.78
Christian	82.61	71.22
Traditional Religion	0	0
No Religion	0	0
Grade (%)		
JS1	50.52	57.55
SS3	49.48	42.45
Age (mean, in years)		
Age (9-22)	12.84	13.52
Location (%)		
Abuja	48.03	48.20
Lagos	51.97	51.80

INTERVIEWS

Based on the survey results, five or six JS1 and six SS3 students at each school were purposively chosen to ensure ethnic and religious diversity in our sample. The selection was based on the tolerance scores (low, medium, and high) of students from three FUCs (one all male, one all female, and one mixed sex) and one state secondary school. We then interviewed the students in groups, which resulted in a total of eight group interviews, two at each school. The interview participants, who were chosen to include a diversity of perspectives, ethnicities, and religions, demonstrated varying tolerance levels, as measured by the survey. The group interviews, which included a total of 47 students, approximately 12 per school, were conducted separately with the JS1 and SS3 students (2 groups of 6) to capture the varied experiences and perspectives of the first- and final-year students. From the 12 participants in the group interviews at each of the four schools, three JS1 and three SS3 students, six from each school, were invited for individual interviews, for a total of 24. We conducted these semistructured

group and individual interviews, which lasted 45 minutes to an hour, with the same students at the beginning and the end of the school year. See Table 2 for a summary of the participants by method type.

Table 2: Overview of Participants by Method Type

	Number of Participants	Organization	Site	Timing
Survey (Social Network Analysis)	643 students	Approx. 40 JS1 and approx. 40 SS3 students at each of the 8 schools	All 8 schools (6 FUCs and 2 state secondary schools)	Pre (September/October 2017) and post (April/May/June 2018)
Student Group Interviews	47 students	8 pre/post group interviews with 47 students: 5-6 JS1 and 6 SS3 students at each of the 4 schools	4 schools (one all-male FUC, one all-female FUC, one mixed-sex FUC, and one state secondary school)	Pre (October/November 2017) and post (April/May/June 2018)
Student Individual Interviews	24 students	24 pre/post individual interviews chosen from those interviewed in groups: 3 JS1 and 3 SS3 students at each of the 4 schools	4 schools (one all-male FUC, one all-female FUC, one mixed-sex FUC, and one state secondary school)	Pre (October/November 2017) and post (April/May/June 2018)

We posed questions to capture the students' viewpoints on several issues, including their overall perceptions of the school, their experiences with friendships and intergroup relations, their encounters within a diverse student population, and how the school influenced these connections. To gain insights into the students' ongoing identity formation, we also inquired about their experiences and perceptions of various ethnic and religious groups, and about their national, ethnic, and religious identities. We used the interviews to explore how students formulate their own categorizations and interpret their experiences that relate to their ethnic and religious identities. This understanding brings depth to the results of the social network analysis survey.

We used NVivo to analyze the interviews. We created codes according to the conceptual framework using etic codes such as "ethnic identity," "religious identity," "national identity," "intergroup interactions," and "tolerance"; emic codes such as "skin color," "discrimination," and "Boko Haram" also emerged (Merriam and Tisdell 2016). The lead author, a white woman from the United States, recognizes that her identity and background influenced her research relationships in Nigeria. In some cases, they facilitated access, but in others her positionality may have limited what her contacts

and the participants felt comfortable discussing or sharing. As an outsider, she regularly reflected on how her positionality shaped her interactions with the participants and she approached the work with a commitment to learn alongside the participants and to practice self-reflexivity. For more than two years before conducting the 10-month study, she worked to build trust with education leaders at the national and school levels. She also prioritized making connections across ethnic and religious lines and gathering the perspectives of participants at all levels, including in the classroom, all while fostering open, respectful relationships.

LIMITATIONS

While FUCs aim to enroll students from across Nigeria, this study revealed that a significant portion of the student population resides in urban regions. Although these students identified with specific states, their urban experiences may have shaped their attitudes, including making them more tolerant, due to their exposure to diverse environments. This self-selection introduces a limitation, as the findings may not be generalizable to the wider population, particularly to those from smaller cities or nonurban areas. Additionally, the study's short time frame may have limited our engagement with the participants and our ability to capture long-term trends or nuances in their attitudes and behaviors. We conducted the surveys and interviews in English, the language of instruction in Nigerian secondary schools, and while most students were proficient, it is possible that conducting the research in a non-native language affected some participants' ability to express themselves fully. Despite these limitations, the FUCs' use of a quota system to ensure that their students come from diverse backgrounds helped us gain insights that were central to this research.

FINDINGS

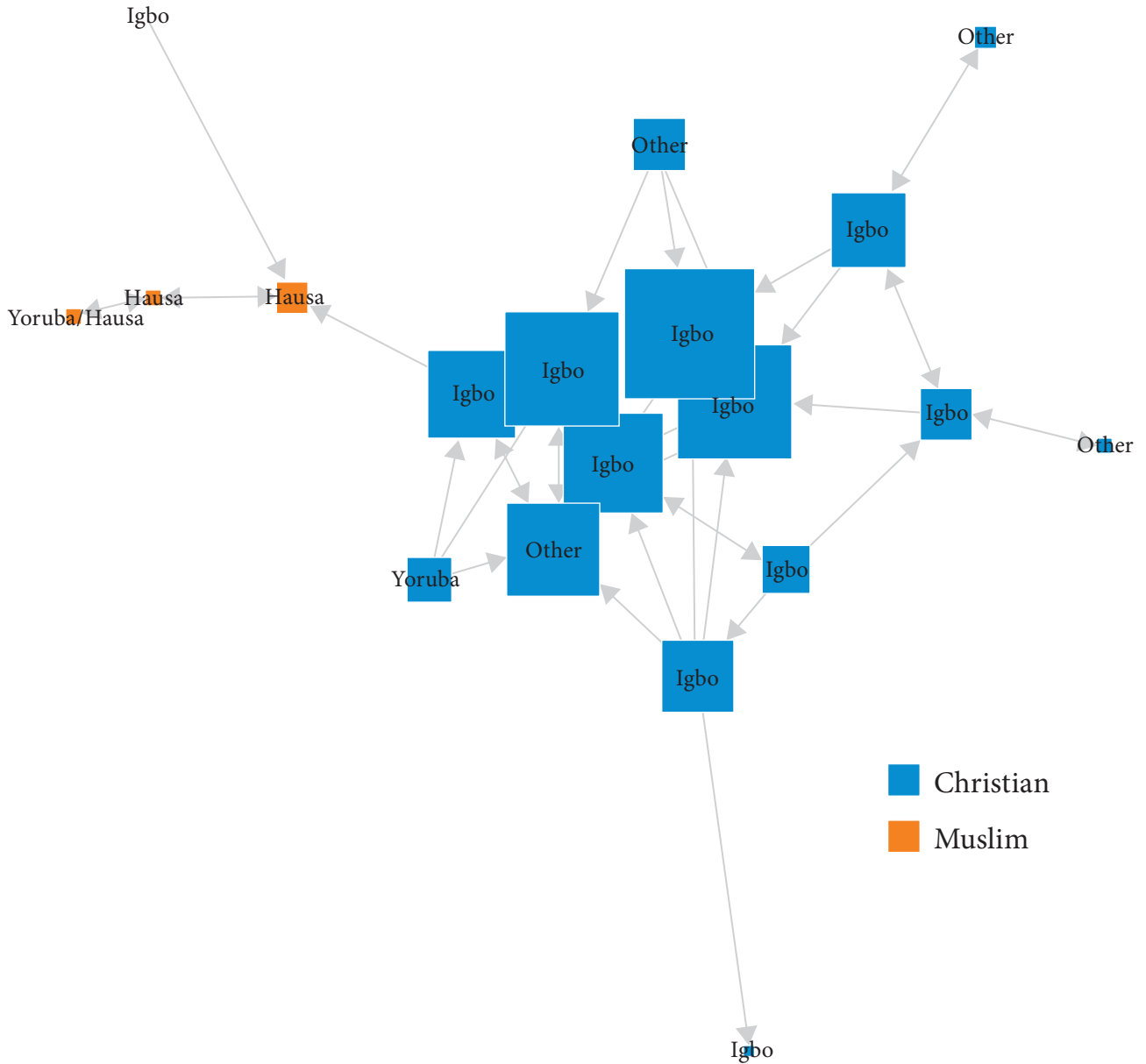
We now provide an overview of the main findings from the social network analysis we conducted to understand friendship patterns across groups. We subsequently explain why we see such patterns, using examples from the interview data.

SOCIAL NETWORK ANALYSIS

On the survey, we asked students to name their five closest friends in the classroom. One striking pattern in the friendship networks we identified is that Hausa Muslim students appear to have fewer connections within the classroom network than other ethno-religious groups; this was true at the beginning and the end of the school year. In the Class E (SS3 all-boys unity school) network shown in Figure 1, we see that the Igbo Christians exhibit the highest eigenvector centrality—that is, they are highly connected to other highly connected individuals and more central in the friendship network. In contrast, Hausa Muslim students have a lower eigenvector centrality—that is, they are

not closely connected to highly connected individuals. As discussed earlier, this division is likely a result of the ethnic, linguistic, and religious divisions and hierarchies that have been historically shaped within Nigeria (Osaghae and Suberu 2005).⁴

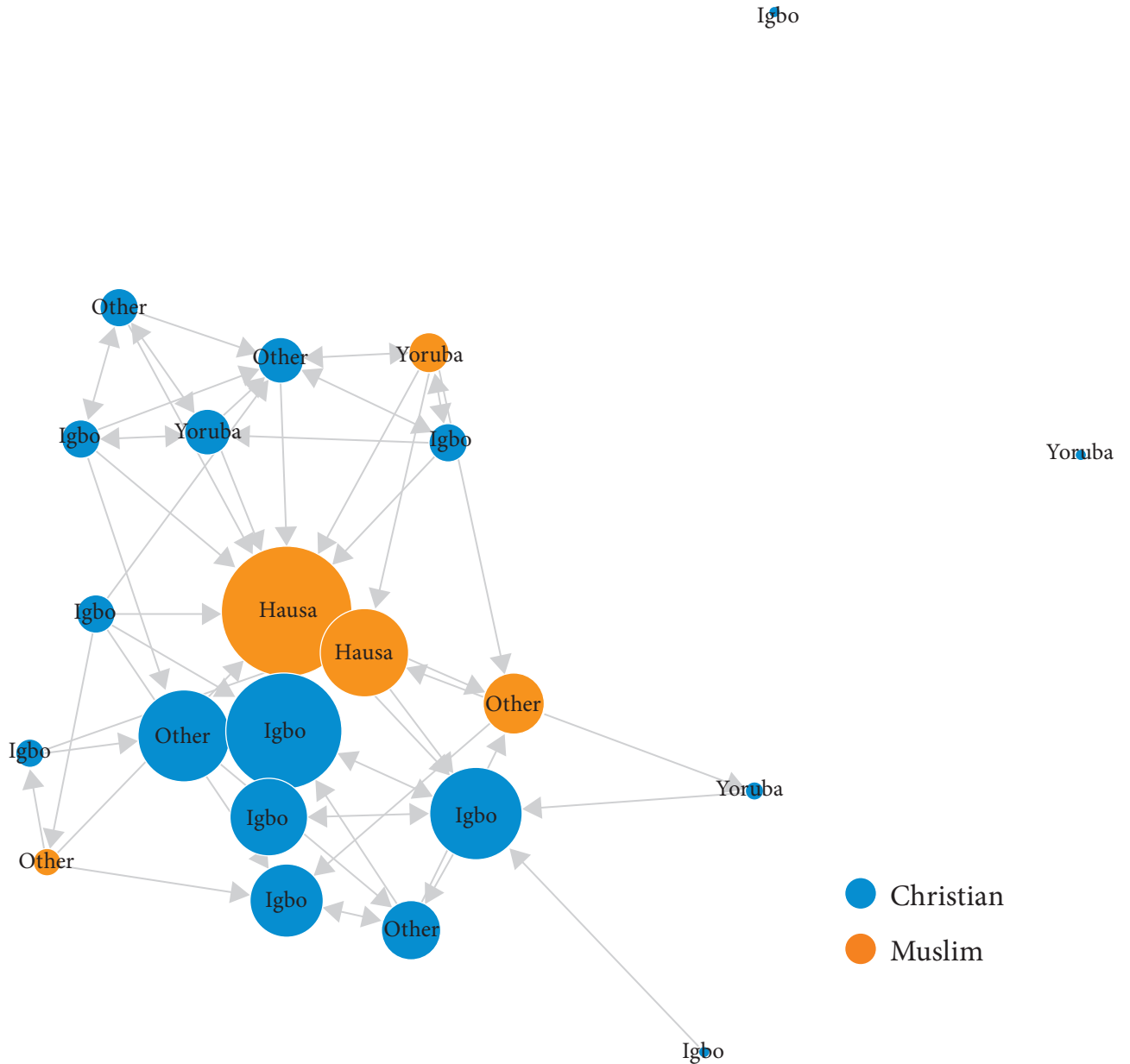
Figure 1: Friendship Network Showing Division of Students in FUC



⁴ The increase in assortativity measures over the year indicates greater division, at least by religion, over time.

Interestingly, as Figure 1 shows, the social networks indicating that Hausa and Muslim students are more integrated into the friendship network were more common in the SS3 classrooms than the JS1 classrooms. All but one JS1 classroom—an all-girls class, shown in Figure 2—showed ethnic or religious divisions at either the beginning or end of the year.⁵

Figure 2: Friendship Network Showing Example of Student Integration in FUC



5 Three SS3 classrooms (1 all female, 1 all male, 1 mixed sex) showed no division by ethnicity or religion at any point during the year.

STUDENT INDIVIDUAL AND GROUP INTERVIEWS

We identified some common friendship patterns through the social network analysis, but we were curious as to why and through what means certain students were separating from others. In this section, we use examples from the individual and the group interviews to explore these friendship network findings further. While the school populations were diverse, separation persisted by religion, ethnicity, and language in the nonformal spaces and practices, such as when students chose beds in the dormitory near others in their religious group.⁶ The students discussed the ways overlapping religious, ethnic, and linguistic identities influenced their relationships.

RELIGION

In many cases, students talked about having ethnically and religiously diverse friendships and positive intergroup interactions. However, several students discussed being separated by religion, particularly in the unity schools. For example, one student at an all-male unity school talked about having more friends from his own religion (Islam) because they do more things together throughout the day, like going to pray. While he did mention that he also has Christian friends, later in the interview he noted that Christian students tend to have more Christian friends. This suggests that the student has a strong sense of self-identification with the Muslim group and less perceived overlap with those he considers part of the Christian group:

Bizo: I feel...because we are sharing the same religion, I feel more closer.

Interviewer: Why do you feel more closer?

Bizo: We do things the same, like when we are going to pray, we do it together. When it comes to the fasting months, we fast, everything we do it together.

(school 3, unity, individual student interview, SS3 male Hausa Muslim, October 12, 2017)

In another instance, an SS3 Hausa Muslim student from a mixed-sex unity school discussed her choice to separate by religion in the dormitories where the students live, including sleeping in a corner near her Muslim friends. She attributes this to the convenience it offers in practicing their religion together. She emphasizes that the separation of religious practices and spaces in the unity schools due to their boarding school nature contributes notably to the division of groups along religious lines. This strengthens their self-categorization into respective religious groups and hinders a restructuring of self-categorization that could encourage friendships across religious lines. This example demonstrates how intergroup

⁶ In Nigeria, ethnicity and language overlap almost perfectly, although the level of fluency in the language associated with one's ethnic group varies.

separation can occur in nonacademic spaces like a dormitory, where administration and staff have fewer controls in place. This contrasts with a classroom, where a teacher can have students sit next to and engage with a diverse group of peers. Students in the dormitory were left to choose their own locations, which enabled existing social relationships and self-categorizations to influence their choices. The schools thus missed an opportunity to encourage students to occupy areas where they could expand and shift perceived identities and develop cross-group friendships.

It was not uncommon for students—both male and female, JS1 and SS3, Muslim and Christian—to discuss separation by religion. Participants did not necessarily refer to separation by religion as a rule that students followed all the time but as a trend toward which many students gravitated. In one SS3 group interview in a mixed-sex unity school, students mentioned a unique situation in which teachers reinforced the religious divisions among students. They described how the female Christian students used hijabs—a Muslim head covering—to hide their identity and deliberately deflect the blame for sneaking out of the dorms to meet their boyfriends. The students described how the Christian teachers intervened on behalf of the Christian students and protected them from severe punishment. They said this occurred at a particularly heated time between Muslim and Christian students. While the students recognized that this situation was not normal, it points to the underlying tensions among the students and teachers that are often avoided and suppressed. The Christian students' casual use of a key identity marker for Muslims not only showed disrespect for their schoolmates but also could have unjustly implicated their Muslim peers. Even the teachers aligned themselves with the students along religious lines instead of uniting to advocate for impartial disciplinary measures, which reflects the significance of religious identity in Nigeria. This experience reinforced group boundaries and intensified students' self-categorizations within their respective groups. The divide between the groups widened as a result.

Having separate religious spaces within the school setting appeared to maintain the schism between Christian and Muslim students and became a physical representation of that separation. The students seemed to gain a sense of ownership around the spaces assigned to them because of their religious identity, which strengthened group categorizations in ways that excluded others. The unity school students discussed the unequal dedication of physical structures and resources to the different religious groups and how it leads to arguments between groups. One student described how the students use the separate religious spaces within the school to exclude and control resources:

Debare: They fight about tribes sometimes, like in the Mosque, that don't allow Christians enter the Mosque and it very frustrating and there is water there. Sometimes if water stop flowing in this school, the only place water will be flowing is in the Mosque and they will not allow anybody to enter.

(school 3, unity, individual student interview, JS1 male Igbo Christian, May 16, 2018)

These tensions further solidified the boundaries between religious groups, as religious identity came to be associated with receiving unequal treatment and of students' varying levels of perceived value within the school environment.

ETHNICITY/LANGUAGE

Religion was not the only means of separation in the schools. The participants also discussed separation and strong self-categorization by ethnic group and language, which closely overlap. Hausa, Yoruba, and Igbo are the largest ethnic groups in Nigeria and their languages are the ones spoken by the most people. The separation by ethnic group shown in the following excerpt from a JS1 group interview at an all-female unity school reveals an actual distinction in interactions by ethnic group:

Cynthia (Ijaw student): There is one Yoruba girl, when anyone speaks Igbo she will say, stop speaking that nonsense language. She will say Hausas are black (*dudu*), and this is not true because my uncle is Hausa and he is fair.

Isioma (Igbo student): They say Igbo people are wicked because they wanted to divide the country with Biafra. I was mopping, and the tidiness captain temporarily borrowed the mop to clean a special place, and Jessica who is Yoruba took the mop and said she is supposed to use it, and it started a quarrel and Ayansola resolved it.

Interviewer: What about this Ayansola?

Adaeze (Hausa/Igbo student): She cheats us in the dining, she gives more food to her tribe, the Yorubas.

Interviewer: What does it mean to be from a particular ethnic group?

Isioma (Igbo student): Like Yorubas are friends with themselves so that they can speak their language.

(school 4, unity, group student interview, JS1 all female, November 16, 2017)

Here the students referenced language as both a reason for and a means of separation by ethnic group, as was common in several of the interviews.

In many of the interviews, students discussed instances of separation and arguments centering on ethnicity. In the next excerpt, a JS1 Hausa Muslim student from an all-male unity school talked about how Hausas sometimes stay separate from others:

Abbas: The Igbos think the Hausas are not kind.

Interviewer: What about the Yorubas?

Abbas: I don't make friends with Yoruba.

Interviewer: Really? Why?

Abbas: I'm just like that.

Interviewer: But why?

Abbas: I hate Yorubas.

Interviewer: Did you hate them before you came to this school?

Abbas: No.

Interviewer: You started hating them here?

Abbas: Yes ma.

Interviewer: What made you hate them?

Abbas: They are careless, they don't take care of their things, they will shit and they will not flush it.

(school 3, unity, individual student interview, JS1 male Hausa Muslim, May 16, 2018)

This student recognized the disdain he had developed for Yoruba students specifically, which he did not have before living with a diverse group of students. This suggests that, as others have found, if proper interventions are not implemented, a diverse school environment can worsen social relations by reinforcing perceived self-categorizations, with less overlap between groups (Irwin 1991; Spivak et al. 2015).

Language is one mode of separation between groups in the schools, which is not unexpected, considering the historical use of language to erect boundaries between groups (Ahmad and Widén 2015; Piller 2001). During the interviews, students provided many examples of language as a marker of groups and a means of separation between groups. One SS3 student from a unity school was from another country and thus offered

the perspective of one who did not identify with a Nigerian ethnic group. She talked about feeling left out when around the Hausa students, who often were speaking Hausa:

Beatrice: They'll gather in one place and be speaking their language, and if you come you won't understand what they're saying and [will] be feeling left out, so you'll just have to leave and go talk to another person, something like that.

Interviewer: And do other tribes do that?

Beatrice: No.

(school 4, unity, individual student interview, SS3 non-Nigerian female Christian, April 25, 2018)

Another Hausa Muslim SS3 student in a mixed-sex unity school talked about the Hausa students separating into different groups. She noted that many of them do not speak English well—part of the legacy of unequal education—so they often congregate and speak to one another in their own language. She said she chooses not to socialize exclusively with the Hausas because she came to the school to learn:

Kadija: I think the most reason that make them to do such—because most of them in this school, they do normally speak their Hausa together, but some of them they don't even know how to speak correct English, so if they mingle with their Hausa people, they will be speaking language together and it will lead them not to go further in their education.

(school 2, unity, individual student interview, SS3 female Hausa Muslim, October 19, 2017)

Again, this indicates a situation where language underlines inequalities between groups. This applies to Hausa students in particular, especially those who come from parts of the country with lower socioeconomic and educational status, as they are less likely to speak English fluently (Fafunwa 1974). Without appropriate school interventions and practices, this may further solidify students' existing self-categorizations and limit opportunities to develop broader perceived group categorizations that bridge ethnicity and religion. It may particularly reinforce the ethno-religious separation of Hausa Muslim students.

Some students in the study said these language divisions create fear, envy, and suspicion among groups. Even though many of the schools in the study, particularly the unity schools, explicitly tell their students to speak English except when in language classes, students from many groups continue to speak their own ethnic languages.

INTERGROUP MARRIAGE

We also asked about intergroup marriage. According to Bogardus (1959), who created the social distance scale, marriage is the most intimate form of social connection and is considered an indicator of the highest level of intergroup tolerance. Of the 19 unity school students interviewed, 13 expressed that, by the end of the year, they wanted to marry within their religion.⁷ This suggests that students continue to value having relationships with others from the same religious group. Our findings also suggest that religion often creates a stricter boundary than ethnicity in friendships at the unity schools.

It is notable that Hausa was the only ethnic group that non-Hausa students said they would not marry into. Six of the 25 (24%) state and unity school students individually interviewed at the end of the year said they would not marry a Hausa.⁸ Of these six students, half were Muslim and half Christian; three were Igbo, two Yoruba, and one Yoruba/Igbo; four attended unity schools, the other two state schools. This singling out of Hausa students as an excluded group mirrors the findings already presented. At the end of the year, 60 percent of the students interviewed from state schools and 28 percent from unity schools expressed a need to marry within their ethnicity. This implies that unity school students are more open to interethnic marriage than those from state schools.⁹ While unity schools appear to promote more diverse interethnic friendships and marriages, religion remains a point of division among their students. This suggests that unity schools do provide pathways to bridge ethnic categorizations but less so for bridging religious group categorizations.

THE INFLUENCE OF OVERLAPPING IDENTITIES ON STUDENT RELATIONS

What emerged in the interviews as particularly important was the separation of Hausa students, especially the Hausa Muslim students. Many students again referenced language as a reason why the Hausa Muslims remain separate. Other studies have pointed to language as a means of group exclusion within schools, such as in South Africa (Soudien and Sayed 2003; Soudien 2010) and Bosnia Herzegovina (Tolomelli 2015). While many students seemed to know words and phrases in languages other than those associated with their ethnic group (not including English), it was rare to find a student who actively used a language other than English or the language associated with their ethnic group to communicate regularly. A Hausa Muslim SS3 student at an all-male unity school said in an interview that students separate by ethnic group. He noted that he preferred

7 This includes one extra interview that I conducted with a volunteer head student only at the end of the year.

8 This includes one extra interview that I conducted with a volunteer head unity school student only at the end of the year. One of these students did say they would marry a Hausa if they understood English—again pointing to a linguistic division among ethnic groups.

9 This could relate to the type of parents who put their children in unity schools, as they may be open to their children marrying outside their ethnic group.

to spend more time with other Hausa students because it makes him “feel like [he’s] home.” He again pointed out the separation between Hausa and Igbo students:

Hamza: Before when you are with them, you feel more comfortable, like I’m with Hausa people most times because I feel like I’m home.

Interviewer: Is there one group they don’t mix with as much, like Igbo, Yoruba, Igala, Tiv?

Hamza: Yes, Igbo.

Hamza: All Hausa stay together, the three ethnic groups interact, but sometimes when it comes to doing things we group ourselves.

(school 3, unity, individual student interview, SS3 male Hausa Muslim, June 5, 2018)

While this excerpt does not identify Hausa Muslims specifically as a separated ethno-religious group, many of the interviews did point to this particular distinction. This separation points to a mirroring of Nigerian ethno-religious division in student interactions. In the following excerpt, a Yoruba Christian female SS3 student in a unity school discusses how Hausa Muslims separate, again emphasizing language as a way to maintain boundaries:

Hope: Like they are Muslim from Muslims. They stay, they don’t want to associate with anybody, they don’t even like staying in the same, in the room, they always like to stay in the same corner, the same room, do everything together, wash, eat together, go to dining, go to Mosque, and if you are following them, you’ll be confused as if they are going to sell you because they always talk Hausa.

Interviewer: Hmmm.

Hope: They don’t speak English.

(school 2, unity, individual student interview, SS3 female Yoruba Christian, October 13, 2017)

Earlier in the interview, this student talked about having Muslim friends, including some Hausas, so discrimination on her part did not appear to be shaping her dialogue.

Some unity school students did recognize that the religious divide, which is especially prominent in their schools, declined over time. One Muslim head student at a unity school described how students argue and divide over religion when they first come to the school—particularly Igbos and Hausas. The interviewee speculated that this division arises from the fact that most Igbos are Christian while most Hausas are Muslim, which reveals the overlap of differences in both tribe and religion. This overlap contributes to deeper rifts and more rigid self-categorizations, resulting in fewer students adopting a more inclusive categorization that might foster cross-group friendships. The student noted that Yoruba students are “quite cool,” and this may be because it is common for Yoruba people to practice either Islam or Christianity. This phenomenon was mentioned in many of the interviews. The head student we interviewed just once did recognize that this division changes over time in his unity school because the school provides a means of interaction for people who would not normally interact regularly in society:

Ayisha: I believe that with your exposure here, we don’t really see that [referring to marrying within ethnic group] as important like their parents would have seen it. I really think that unity schools are really great and I am happy I came here.

(school, religion, and ethnicity undisclosed for purposes of confidentiality, Unity, individual student interview, April 25, 2018)

This also indicates that unity schools provide an opportunity for students to change their views on other groups and their overlapping categorizations of groups over time, and even to alter views that have been sustained across generations.

CONCLUSION

Through our social network analysis and interview data, we find that Hausa Muslims are the ethno-religious group most separated and stigmatized within the FUCs. The compounding of religion, ethnicity, and language seems to contribute to the specific separation of Hausa Muslim students, particularly in light of the intergroup differences, social boundaries, and hierarchies that exist in Nigeria (Blommaert 2010; Risager 2012). Our findings indicate that religion creates a higher boundary than ethnicity, which may stem from the perception that conflicts are driven by religious differences. Religion is also a pervasive aspect of life for many Nigerians, especially in the public sphere, and unlike ethnicity, it may be seen as a divide too deep and sacred to cross—particularly when it comes to marriage, which holds significant social and religious importance in Nigerian society.

Our findings also highlight the compounding effects of ethnicity and religion that lead to exclusion in student intergroup relations in the school setting. This particular form of stigmatization and inequality has roots in colonial history, which created socioeconomic and educational disparities between those in the north (primarily Hausa Muslims) and those in the south (Fafunwa 1974; Mamdani 1996; Osaghae and Suberu 2005). The current conflict in Nigeria between Boko Haram and Fulani herdsman also tends to be associated with Hausas, Muslims, and those from the north. This creates a hierarchy wherein the overlapping identities of Hausa and Muslim are at the bottom. These social relations are magnified in the FUCs, where the Hausa Muslim students' religious practices and language overlap to mark their group as separate. Thus, the larger patterns of stigmatization in society align with current and historic patterns of conflict and are mirrored in the schools. These patterns are maintained amid an illusion of unity and the failure to use the negative intergroup relations as an opportunity to have students learn from the conflict.

Our findings also point to the importance of language as a form of both connection and exclusion in the school context. When language is seen as a symbol of one's ethnicity or social group, it is more likely to be a defining factor in one's relationship with others (Ahmad and Widén 2015; Irvine and Gal 2000). When a person views language as representative of a particular social group, communicating with others who speak that language can connect them with people who are likely to have shared values and perspectives (Ahmad and Widén 2015). Language, which may overlap with other identities, such as ethnicity, can also reinforce existing inequalities and hierarchies within a society (Blommaert 2010; Risager 2012).

We find that the older students we interviewed had more integrated friendship networks than the students we interviewed in their first year, which points to the role schools can play in building intergroup tolerance. While students may be open to friendships with those from other groups, views on intergroup marriage, particularly between religions, may be more difficult to shift (Bogardus 1933). Being unwilling to marry across ethnic or religious lines should not be viewed as a total lack of tolerance but as a reflection of whether students have a particular level of tolerance. Recognizing how students self-categorize themselves and other groups has important implications within a school context. For example, although language in some contexts can be a means of separation (Soudien and Sayed 2003), it also can be an expression of social solidarity that should not be discounted (Ahmad and Widén 2015). It could instead be used to create positive intergroup interactions in school and opportunities for interethnic learning and unity (Paris 2012).

While integrated schools have the power to shift deeply held mindsets about religion, ethnicity, and language, their practices and attitudes can also reproduce and harden existing social inequities that mirror those in the broader society. Our findings point to the importance of school structure and sustained contact among students in both

academic and nonacademic spaces in shifting attitudes across groups (see also Warikoo 2010). Diversity alone will not improve social relations. What is needed are sustained intergroup interactions, critical discussions of racial and ethnic identity, intergroup contacts, and friendships in both academic and nonacademic contexts that will shape the way students interact with one another (Janmaat 2012). Students and other school actors can interact in ways that strengthen the existing habitus (social reproduction) or shape a new habitus (social transformation). The separation of groups and stigmatization within a school is a reflection of society, and without the proper interventions it will detract from the goals of intergroup unity within diverse school contexts (Irwin 1991; Spivak et al. 2015). Without discounting the richness in students' diverse languages and groups, an approach that encourages intergroup peer-to-peer teaching and learning could foster intergroup unity—which is the goal of the unity schools (Paris 2012). Teachers and school leaders play important roles in fostering inclusion and open discussion, particularly around sensitive topics related to identity (Kuppens and Langer 2016). With a deeper understanding of students' perspectives, they could address challenges more effectively and create more positive experiences within the school environment.

In this article, we have presented empirical insights into students' perspectives on intergroup relations in a school environment that is affected by conflict. Our findings point to the importance of overlapping and compounding identity markers such as ethnicity, language, and religion. Our research contributes important insights into how out-groups can be doubly stigmatized, and into how schools can foster intergroup friendships. The findings help to increase understanding of diverse schools in Nigeria and other global contexts, specifically the dynamics of diverse student interactions.

Our findings also contribute to the broader discourse in the fields of comparative education and education in emergencies on the role schools play in either fostering positive intergroup relations or exacerbating existing tensions. Furthermore, our approach to this topic—the students' perspectives—offers a distinctive viewpoint in the current research landscape, which is complemented by our analysis of their friendship networks using both quantitative and qualitative data.

Future research should aim to increase understanding of students' experiences and their perspectives on interacting with a diverse population, and investigate how physical spaces and formal practices overlap with identity to shape student interactions. The role of educators as facilitators and mediators in diverse schools could also be investigated. This would bolster the extensive existing research on the way curriculum shapes identity (Luna, Evans, and Davis 2015; Walton et al. 2018) by including other important aspects of school life.

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