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Teaching Controversial Historical Issues in Nigerian Secondary Schools: Challenges and Prospects

[1]Moga Ezekiel, PhD; [2]Bashama Kaze Akwanga; & [3]Dominic Ali Alexander

[1]Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, Nasarawa State University, Keffi. [2]Department of History and Diplomatic Studies, Faculty of Arts, Nasarawa State University, Keffi. [3]Nasarawa State Ministry of Education, Lafia.

Corresponding Author: mogaezekiel@nsuk.edu.ng

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Abstract

The teaching of controversial historical issues has become an important aspect of history education in contemporary societies because it promotes critical thinking, democratic values, national consciousness, and informed citizenship among learners. In Nigeria, the teaching of sensitive historical topics such as colonialism, the Nigerian Civil War, ethnic conflicts, religious tensions, military rule, electoral violence, and resource control controversies remains a major challenge in secondary schools. Therefore, his paper examines the challenges and prospects of teaching controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools within the context of the recent revival of history education in the national curriculum. The paper adopts a theoretical and descriptive approach through the review of relevant literature, and scholarly arguments on history pedagogy and curriculum implementation. The study further identifies major challenges confronting the effective teaching of controversial historical issues to include inadequate teacher preparation, fear of political or ethnic bias, lack of instructional materials, poor pedagogical approaches, curriculum limitations, and students' diverse socio-cultural backgrounds. The paper also highlights the prospects of teaching controversial historical issues, including the promotion of national unity, historical consciousness, peacebuilding, tolerance, civic competence, and learners' analytical abilities. It concludes that despite existing obstacles, the effective teaching of controversial historical issues can contribute significantly to democratic development and sustainable national integration in Nigeria if properly managed through balanced instructional strategies and curriculum support. The

paper recommends continuous teacher training, provision of relevant instructional resources, curriculum reforms, and the adoption of learner-centered pedagogical approaches to enhance objective and constructive history teaching in Nigerian secondary schools.

Keywords: History education, controversial historical issues, secondary schools, curriculum, challenges, prospects, Nigeria.

Introduction

Education is universally recognized as a major instrument for social transformation, national development, and cultural continuity. Through education, societies transmit their values, traditions, knowledge systems, and historical experiences from one generation to another. Among the various school subjects offered in secondary schools, History occupies a unique position because it enables learners to understand the past, interpret present realities, and prepare for future responsibilities. History education exposes students to political developments, cultural interactions, leadership experiences, societal conflicts, and national transformations that shape human societies. In this regard, the study of History contributes significantly to citizenship education, national consciousness, moral development, and the promotion of democratic values (Akinpelu & Bamidele, 2021).

The renewed interest in History education has revived discussions concerning the teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools. Controversial historical issues refer to historical events, developments, personalities, or experiences that generate disagreement, emotional reactions, and conflicting interpretations among individuals and groups in society. Such issues are usually politically, ethnically, culturally, or religiously sensitive because they touch on questions of identity, justice, oppression, power, and collective memory. According to Nwankwo and Ibrahim (2023), controversial historical issues often involve multiple perspectives and competing narratives which make objective interpretation difficult within educational settings. In many societies, these issues remain subjects of debate because different groups interpret historical events according to their social experiences, political interests, and cultural backgrounds.

Nigeria possesses numerous controversial historical issues arising from its complex colonial and post-colonial experiences. Since the amalgamation of the Northern and Southern Protectorates in 1914 by the British colonial administration, Nigeria has experienced persistent ethnic, regional, and political tensions that have shaped its historical development. Events such as colonial domination, the Nigerian Civil War, military dictatorship, ethnic and religious crises, electoral violence, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, resource control struggles in the Niger Delta, and insurgency in the North-East remain

highly sensitive topics within Nigerian society. These issues continue to provoke debates among scholars, politicians, ethnic groups, and ordinary citizens because of their emotional and political implications. For example, interpretations surrounding the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970 differ considerably among ethnic groups and regions. While some view the conflict as a struggle against marginalization and injustice, others perceive it as a threat to national unity and sovereignty (Okafor, 2021). Such divergent interpretations make the teaching of these issues sensitive within secondary school classrooms.

The teaching of controversial historical issues has become increasingly important in modern education because contemporary societies require citizens who can think critically, tolerate opposing viewpoints, and participate meaningfully in democratic processes. Modern educational philosophy encourages teachers to move beyond rote memorization toward inquiry-based learning where students analyze evidence, evaluate differing opinions, and develop informed judgments about societal issues. In this context, History education serves as an avenue through which learners can critically examine the causes and consequences of historical events while understanding the complexity of human experiences. Yusuf and Alabi (2024) observed that the teaching of controversial issues promotes reflective thinking, democratic engagement, empathy, and conflict resolution skills among students. Through classroom discussions and historical inquiry, learners are encouraged to appreciate multiple perspectives and avoid extreme prejudices or stereotypes.

Globally, many countries have integrated controversial historical issues into school curricula as part of efforts to promote democratic culture and social understanding. In countries such as South Africa, Germany, Rwanda, and the United States, schools teach sensitive historical topics including apartheid, the Holocaust, genocide, slavery, racial discrimination, and civil rights struggles as means of promoting reconciliation and civic consciousness. These examples demonstrate that controversial historical issues can serve educational purposes when properly handled by teachers.

In the Nigerian context, teaching students about colonial exploitation, military authoritarianism, ethnic conflicts, and democratic struggles can help young people understand the importance of justice, national unity, peaceful coexistence, and responsible leadership. Such knowledge is essential in a diverse country where historical misunderstandings often contribute to social tensions and political instability. In addition, the teaching of controversial historical issues is closely connected to the broader objectives of secondary education in Nigeria. The National Policy on Education emphasizes the promotion of national unity, citizenship education, moral values, and social harmony among learners. These objectives cannot be fully achieved without exposing students to important historical realities that shaped the nation's development (Ojo & Lawal, 2020.,(Eze and Musa, 2022).

The reintroduction of History into Nigerian schools has therefore created renewed opportunities for examining how controversial historical issues are taught in secondary schools. It is against this background that this study examines the teaching of controversial

historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools with particular focus on the challenges and prospects associated with the teaching process.

The paper is segmented as follows: introduction which is on-going, conceptual clarification, nature of controversial historical issues in Nigeria, challenges facing teachers in teaching controversial historical issues, prospects of teaching controversial historical issues, educational implications of teaching controversial historical issues, and conclusion.

History Education

History education refers to the teaching and learning of past human events, experiences, cultures, and societal developments with the aim of helping learners understand historical processes and their relevance to contemporary society. It involves the systematic transmission of historical knowledge, values, attitudes, and analytical skills through formal instructional processes in schools and other educational institutions. History education enables students to examine the political, economic, cultural, and social experiences of societies across different periods while developing critical thinking and interpretative abilities. In the Nigerian context, History education serves as an instrument for promoting national identity, citizenship consciousness, cultural preservation, and democratic values among learners (Nwafor, 2024).

History education also contributes significantly to moral and civic development because it exposes learners to the achievements, mistakes, struggles, and sacrifices of past generations. Through the study of historical events, students develop appreciation for patriotism, leadership, tolerance, and social responsibility. Contemporary scholars further emphasize that History education encourages reflective thinking and informed participation in national affairs. The subject therefore goes beyond memorization of dates and events to include analytical interpretation of historical evidence and societal transformation (Ojo et al., 2026).

Controversial Historical Issues

Controversial historical issues refer to historical events, personalities, policies, or experiences that generate disagreement, debate, emotional reactions, and conflicting interpretations among individuals or groups within society. These issues are usually sensitive because they are connected to matters such as politics, ethnicity, religion, colonialism, nationalism, war, slavery, identity, and social justice. According to Alvén (2024), controversial historical issues are topics in history education that involve multiple interpretations and perspectives due to differences in ideology, historical evidence, and collective memory. Such issues remain debatable because different people or communities often interpret the same historical event in different ways based on their cultural, political, or social experiences.

The teaching of controversial historical issues are considered important because they encourage critical thinking, inquiry, democratic participation, and tolerance among students. According to Merry & Schinkel (2021), the teaching of controversial historical issues helps learners develop historical empathy, which enables them to understand the motivations, experiences, and actions of people in the past.

Examples of controversial historical issues in Nigeria include the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, colonial rule and its impact, military governance, ethnic conflicts, electoral violence, and debates concerning resource control in the Niger Delta region. At the international level, examples of controversial historical issues include slavery in the United States, apartheid in South Africa, the Holocaust in Europe, and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. These issues continue to generate debate because they are linked to questions of justice, identity, discrimination, and political power (Skura et al., 2024).

Secondary Schools

Secondary schools are formal educational institutions established to provide education to learners after primary education and before tertiary education. Secondary education occupies the middle level of the educational system and is designed to equip learners with academic knowledge, vocational skills, moral values, and civic competencies necessary for national development and higher education. In Nigeria, secondary education is divided into junior secondary school and senior secondary school, usually catering for students between the ages of 12 and 18 years. Through subjects such as History, Government, Civic Education, and Social Studies, students are exposed to national and global issues that help them understand their society and the wider world.

Secondary schools are particularly important in the teaching of controversial historical issues because students at this educational level possess the intellectual maturity required for critical analysis and reflective discussion. Teachers in secondary schools are expected to encourage students to analyze historical evidence, evaluate multiple perspectives, and develop independent judgment regarding historical events and societal problems. Such educational experiences contribute to the development of critical thinking, tolerance, and peaceful coexistence among learners.

Examples of secondary schools in Nigeria include public secondary schools funded by government authorities, private secondary schools established by individuals or organizations, missionary schools managed by religious bodies, and unity schools established by the Federal Government to promote national integration. These schools contribute significantly to the intellectual and moral development of students by exposing them to academic and civic learning experiences.

Concept of Curriculum

Curriculum refers to the totality of learning experiences, instructional contents, educational objectives, teaching methods, and assessment procedures organized by educational institutions for learners. It represents the planned educational programme developed to achieve specific educational goals and national objectives. Curriculum is broader than classroom teaching because it includes co-curricular activities, values, attitudes, and practical experiences designed to ensure the holistic development of learners.

Educational experts explain that curriculum serves as a guide for teachers, students, schools, and educational authorities by determining what should be taught, how it should be taught, and the expected learning outcomes. In Nigeria, curriculum development and review are coordinated mainly by the Nigerian Educational Research and Development Council in line with the National Policy on Education and societal needs.

The curriculum plays a central role in shaping students' understanding of controversial historical issues because it determines the topics, perspectives, and learning activities included in school instruction. A balanced and inclusive curriculum encourages critical thinking, inquiry, problem-solving, and objective interpretation of historical events. Conversely, a biased curriculum may distort historical realities and promote prejudice or misunderstanding among learners.

Examples of curriculum include the formal curriculum, hidden curriculum, and co-curricular curriculum. The formal curriculum consists of officially approved subjects such as History, Civic Education, Government, and Social Studies taught in schools. The hidden curriculum involves the values, attitudes, and behaviours indirectly transmitted through school culture and teacher-student relationships. The co-curricular curriculum includes activities such as debates, excursions, cultural festivals, and history clubs that complement classroom learning experiences.

In the context of history education, curriculum implementation often involves the use of inquiry methods, discussion strategies, project work, documentaries, and debates to help students understand controversial historical issues. For example, students may be asked to compare different historical accounts of colonial rule in Africa or analyze differing interpretations of the Nigerian Civil War. Such activities help learners develop analytical skills and historical consciousness.

Nature of Controversial Historical Issues in Nigeria

As earlier cited, controversial historical issues refer to historical events, personalities, ideologies, and interpretations that generate disagreement, emotional reactions, political debates, or ethnic and religious tensions among individuals and groups within society. In Nigeria, controversial historical issues are deeply connected with colonialism, ethnicity, religion, politics, civil conflict, leadership failures, and questions of national identity. These issues remain sensitive because different groups often interpret historical events from varying perspectives based on ethnic, regional, political, or religious interests. The teaching of such issues in Nigerian secondary schools has therefore become both important and challenging because history education is expected to promote national unity, critical thinking, civic consciousness, and democratic values among learners (Nwafor, 2025).

One major controversial historical issue in Nigeria is the history of colonialism and British rule. Colonialism remains controversial because scholars and citizens disagree on whether British colonial administration contributed positively or negatively to Nigeria's development. Some historians argue that colonialism introduced western education, railways, modern

administration, and Christianity, while others maintain that colonialism exploited Nigeria's resources, weakened indigenous institutions, and created ethnic divisions that still affect national unity today. For example, the amalgamation of Northern and Southern Nigeria in 1914 by Lord Lugard is often debated because many scholars believe it joined culturally different groups together without adequate preparation for national integration. In classroom discussions, students from different backgrounds may express conflicting opinions regarding the long-term effects of colonial rule on Nigeria's political and economic development (Adeyemi & Onigiobi, 2020).

Another controversial historical issue in Nigeria is the Nigerian Civil War of 1967–1970, commonly called the Biafran War. The civil war remains one of the most sensitive historical topics in Nigeria because of the enormous loss of lives, destruction of property, starvation, displacement of civilians, and ethnic tensions associated with the conflict. Different ethnic groups often interpret the causes and consequences of the war differently. Some groups perceive the war as a struggle for self-determination and protection of the Igbo people, while others consider it an attempt to divide Nigeria. Issues such as the January 1966 coup, the counter-coup of July 1966, and the massacre of Igbos in Northern Nigeria remain highly emotional topics. For instance, discussions concerning the role of General Yakubu Gowon, Chukwuemeka Odumegwu Ojukwu, and foreign powers during the war can generate strong emotional reactions among students and teachers. The continued agitation by some groups for Biafra further increases the sensitivity of this historical issue in Nigerian classrooms (Nwafor, 2025).

Religious conflicts and extremism also constitute controversial historical issues in Nigeria. The historical development of religious crises involving Christians and Muslims often creates tension because religion remains highly sensitive in Nigerian society. Historical events such as the Maitatsine riots of the 1980s, the introduction of Sharia law in some northern states, and the Boko Haram insurgency generate different interpretations and emotional debates among students. Some learners may view these issues from religious perspectives rather than objective historical viewpoints. For example, discussions concerning the causes of Boko Haram insurgency, government responses, and the role of religious extremism may provoke disagreements among students from different religious backgrounds. Teachers therefore face difficulties in maintaining neutrality while explaining such historical developments (Adeyemi & Onigiobi, 2020).

Ethnic politics and election-related violence represent another controversial historical issue in Nigeria. Since independence in 1960, ethnic rivalry has influenced political leadership, resource allocation, and electoral processes. Historical events such as the Western Region crisis of the 1960s, the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, and post-election violence in different parts of Nigeria remain controversial because they involve accusations of ethnic marginalization, injustice, and political manipulation. For instance, the annulment of the election won by Chief Moshood Abiola is often interpreted differently across Nigeria. Some view it as a violation of democracy, while others emphasize the political complexities

surrounding military rule at the time. These differing interpretations make classroom discussions difficult because students may develop arguments influenced by family, regional, or political affiliations (Enwuru, 2026).

The issue of military rule in Nigeria is equally controversial. Nigeria experienced several military governments between 1966 and 1999, and opinions concerning military administrations remain divided. Some Nigerians believe that military rulers contributed to infrastructural development and national stability, while others argue that military regimes promoted authoritarianism, corruption, human rights abuses, and suppression of democratic freedoms. Historical discussions involving leaders such as General Sani Abacha, General Ibrahim Babangida, and General Muhammadu Buhari often provoke intense debates among students. For example, while some citizens commend Buhari's anti-corruption campaigns during his military regime, others criticize the regime for human rights violations and press censorship. Such conflicting opinions make the teaching of military history controversial in Nigerian schools (Enwuru, 2026).

Another controversial issue is the debate surrounding resource control and the Niger Delta crisis. Communities in the Niger Delta have historically complained about environmental degradation, oil exploitation, and economic marginalization despite the region's contribution to national revenue through crude oil production. The activities of militant groups such as the Niger Delta Avengers and the Movement for the Emancipation of the Niger Delta (MEND) generate differing opinions among Nigerians. Some people consider the militants freedom fighters advocating for justice and development, while others see them as threats to national security and economic stability. Discussions concerning oil politics, environmental injustice, and federal revenue allocation therefore remain sensitive in history classrooms (Enwuru, 2026).

In addition, corruption and leadership failures in Nigeria form controversial historical discussions. Historical analyses of political corruption involving past civilian and military leaders often generate debates because political supporters and opponents interpret such events differently. For example, controversies surrounding fuel subsidy scandals, electoral fraud, and misuse of public funds are sensitive because some individuals view them through partisan lenses. Students may therefore struggle to separate historical facts from political sentiments during classroom discussions (Enwuru, 2026).

Furthermore, the removal and later reintroduction of history into Nigerian secondary schools is itself a controversial educational issue. Many scholars and citizens criticized the removal of history from the basic education curriculum because it weakened national consciousness and reduced students' understanding of Nigerian heritage. The reintroduction of history has revived debates concerning curriculum content, historical accuracy, and ideological bias in textbooks. Some Nigerians fear that certain historical narratives may be manipulated to favour particular ethnic or political interests. Public reactions on online platforms also reveal concerns regarding whether students are being taught "true Nigerian history" or distorted colonial narratives (Nwafor, 2025).

Overall, controversial historical issues in Nigeria are characterized by emotional sensitivity, multiple interpretations, ethnic and religious dimensions, political disagreements, and ideological conflicts. These issues remain significant because they influence national identity, social cohesion, political stability, and civic education. Proper teaching of controversial historical issues can help students develop critical thinking skills, tolerance, historical consciousness, and democratic values necessary for peaceful coexistence in Nigeria.

Challenges Facing Teachers in Teaching Controversial Historical Issues

The teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools is confronted with numerous challenges that affect effective classroom instruction and students' understanding of history. Controversial historical issues often involve sensitive political, ethnic, religious, and cultural matters that generate emotional reactions and disagreements among learners. Teachers are therefore expected to maintain objectivity, encourage critical thinking, and promote national unity while discussing historical topics that many citizens consider sensitive. However, several institutional, pedagogical, social, and political factors hinder teachers from effectively teaching such issues in Ni gerian schools (Nwafor, 2025).

One major challenge facing teachers is inadequate professional training on handling controversial issues in the classroom. Many history teachers in Nigeria were not adequately trained on methods of teaching sensitive and emotionally charged historical topics. As a result, some teachers avoid discussing controversial issues in detail because they fear creating tension among students or provoking negative reactions from parents and school authorities. For example, during discussions on the Nigerian Civil War, some teachers may deliberately skip important aspects of the conflict to avoid ethnic disagreements in class. Lack of specialized training in conflict-sensitive pedagogy therefore limits teachers' confidence and effectiveness in addressing controversial historical matters objectively (Nwafor, 2025).

Another serious challenge is the shortage of instructional materials and reliable historical resources. Effective teaching of controversial historical issues requires access to textbooks, archival materials, documentaries, maps, newspapers, journals, and digital resources that present balanced interpretations of historical events. However, many Nigerian secondary schools lack adequate libraries, ICT facilities, and updated history textbooks. In some schools, teachers depend on outdated materials that provide incomplete or biased accounts of historical events. For instance, some textbooks discuss the Nigerian Civil War without presenting perspectives from different regions and ethnic groups. This limitation prevents students from critically analyzing historical controversies from multiple viewpoints (Onikoyi et al., 2025).

Bias and personal sentiments also constitute major challenges in teaching controversial historical issues. Teachers are members of society and may possess ethnic, political, or religious biases that unconsciously influence their classroom instruction. Some teachers present historical events from the perspective of their ethnic or political group rather than maintaining neutrality. For example, a teacher from a region heavily affected by the civil war may present emotionally charged narratives that influence students' opinions. Such bias can

encourage prejudice, misinformation, and division among learners instead of promoting critical inquiry and national understanding (Adeyemi & Onigiobi, 2020).

Fear of political or social backlash further discourages teachers from teaching controversial historical topics openly. Certain historical issues in Nigeria remain politically sensitive because they involve criticisms of government policies, military regimes, corruption, electoral malpractice, or ethnic marginalization. Teachers may therefore fear sanctions from school authorities, community leaders, or government agencies if their lessons are perceived as politically biased or provocative. For instance, classroom discussions concerning the annulment of the June 12 election or military human rights abuses may create anxiety among teachers who fear accusations of political indoctrination. Consequently, some teachers avoid meaningful classroom debates on sensitive historical topics (Enwuru, 2026).

Large class size is another obstacle affecting the teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools. Effective discussion of controversial issues requires interactive teaching methods such as debates, group discussions, role play, and inquiry-based learning. However, overcrowded classrooms make such learner-centered approaches difficult to implement. In schools where a single teacher handles over fifty students, maintaining discipline and ensuring active participation during discussions becomes challenging. Students may become emotionally aggressive during debates involving ethnic or religious issues, thereby disrupting classroom management (Bashar & Yasin, 2020).

Inadequate time allocation for history instruction also affects teachers' ability to teach controversial historical issues effectively. Many secondary schools allocate limited periods to history education despite the broad nature of the curriculum. Teachers are often pressured to complete the syllabus before external examinations, leaving little time for critical discussions and detailed analysis of sensitive historical events. Consequently, teachers may focus mainly on memorization of facts rather than deep classroom engagement with controversial issues. For example, students may be required to memorize dates and names associated with the civil war without analyzing its causes, consequences, and lessons for national unity (Nwafor, 2025).

Students' emotional reactions and preconceived opinions also create challenges for teachers. Many students enter the classroom with ideas influenced by family narratives, ethnic loyalties, religious teachings, or social media discussions. These pre-existing beliefs may affect their willingness to accept alternative historical interpretations. For example, students discussing religious conflicts or ethnic crises may become defensive when historical facts contradict the narratives they learned from their communities. Teachers therefore face the difficult task of balancing emotional sensitivity with factual historical instruction (Adeyemi & Onigiobi, 2020).

Another challenge is the politicization of history education in Nigeria. Historical narratives are sometimes influenced by political interests, leading to disagreements over what should be included in school curricula. Governments and curriculum planners may emphasize certain historical events while ignoring others. This selective presentation of history can create mistrust among teachers and students regarding the credibility of instructional content. For

instance, debates continue concerning whether Nigerian history textbooks adequately address issues such as ethnic marginalization, military oppression, and corruption. Teachers may therefore struggle to present balanced historical narratives when official curriculum materials appear politically selective (Enwuru, 2026).

Poor teacher motivation and inadequate funding of education further hinder effective teaching. Many history teachers in Nigerian secondary schools experience low salaries, irregular payment of wages, poor working conditions, and limited opportunities for professional development. These conditions reduce teachers' commitment to extensive classroom research and preparation required for teaching controversial issues effectively. In some rural schools, teachers lack access to internet facilities and modern instructional technologies needed for interactive history lessons (Onikoyi et al., 2025).

The challenge of misinformation through social media has also become significant in recent years. Students increasingly rely on unverified online content and politically biased narratives regarding Nigerian history. False or exaggerated information shared through social media platforms can influence classroom discussions and create confusion among learners. For example, conflicting online interpretations of the Biafran War, colonialism, or electoral violence may make it difficult for teachers to convince students about verified historical evidence. Teachers must therefore spend additional time correcting misconceptions and guiding students toward credible historical sources.

Furthermore, insecurity and social instability in some parts of Nigeria affect the teaching of controversial issues. In regions affected by terrorism, communal clashes, or political violence, discussions relating to conflict and national unity may provoke fear and emotional distress among students and teachers. For example, teachers in areas affected by Boko Haram insurgency may find discussions on religious extremism particularly difficult because students may have direct experiences of violence and displacement. Such situations require emotional sensitivity and psychological preparedness from teachers.

Despite these challenges, the teaching of controversial historical issues remains essential for promoting democratic culture, national integration, peacebuilding, and critical thinking among Nigerian students. When properly taught, controversial historical issues can help learners appreciate multiple perspectives, develop tolerance, and understand the historical roots of contemporary national problems. Teachers therefore require adequate training, instructional materials, government support, and professional development opportunities to effectively handle controversial historical discussions in Nigerian secondary schools.

Prospects of Teaching Controversial Historical Issues

The teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools holds enormous prospects for national development, democratic consolidation, and intellectual advancement among students. In recent years, educational scholars have increasingly emphasized that exposing learners to sensitive historical topics such as colonialism, the Nigerian Civil War, military rule, electoral violence, ethnic conflicts, the #EndSARS protests, religious crises, and

resource control struggles can help students develop critical consciousness and civic competence (Adeleke & Eze, 2023). Rather than avoiding difficult historical realities, contemporary educational approaches advocate engaging students in reflective discussions that encourage independent reasoning and tolerance of divergent viewpoints. This trend reflects global educational reforms that prioritize inquiry-based learning, democratic participation, and critical pedagogy within history and social studies education (Ogunyemi, 2023).

One major prospect of teaching controversial historical issues is the promotion of critical thinking and analytical reasoning among students. The modern world requires learners who can examine evidence objectively, evaluate multiple perspectives, and draw informed conclusions on social and political matters. Through classroom discussions on controversial historical events, students learn how to interrogate historical narratives rather than merely memorizing facts. For instance, when students analyze differing interpretations of the Nigerian Civil War or the annulment of the June 12, 1993 presidential election, they are exposed to diverse opinions and historical evidence that stimulate intellectual curiosity and rational judgment. Such classroom engagement helps learners become reflective citizens capable of participating meaningfully in democratic governance and nation-building (Nwosu & Ibrahim, 2022). According to Yusuf and Adeyemi (2021), controversial issue pedagogy enhances students' reasoning abilities and deepens intellectual engagement in history classrooms.

Another significant prospect is the strengthening of national unity and reconciliation. Nigeria is a multi-ethnic and multi-religious society with a long history of political tensions and communal conflicts. Many national crises have persisted because younger generations possess limited understanding of the historical roots of these conflicts. The teaching of controversial historical issues creates opportunities for dialogue, empathy, and historical understanding among students from diverse backgrounds. For example, discussions on the causes and consequences of the Nigerian Civil War can help students appreciate the dangers of ethnic hatred, political intolerance, and disunity. Similarly, classroom engagement with topics such as the Maitatsine crises, Boko Haram insurgency, or Niger Delta militancy can encourage learners to appreciate peaceful coexistence and conflict resolution (Usman & Oloruntoba, 2024). Ezeani and Salihu (2022) observed that history education contributes significantly to social cohesion and peacebuilding in plural societies such as Nigeria.

The teaching of controversial historical issues also promotes democratic values and civic responsibility among learners. Democratic societies depend on citizens who are politically informed, tolerant of opposing views, and committed to justice and accountability. Through debates and classroom discussions on issues such as military dictatorship, corruption, election malpractice, and human rights abuses, students gain practical understanding of democratic principles and constitutional governance. The recent #EndSARS protests in Nigeria, for example, provide a relevant historical case through which students can examine issues of police brutality, youth activism, state repression, and civic participation. Discussing such contemporary historical controversies enables learners to appreciate the importance of

peaceful protest, rule of law, and responsible citizenship in sustaining democracy (Abubakar & Nwachukwu, 2025). Okeke (2020) maintained that history education plays a vital role in cultivating democratic consciousness and active citizenship among youths.

Furthermore, the growing integration of technology into education presents new opportunities for teaching controversial historical issues effectively. Information and Communication Technology (ICT), digital archives, documentaries, online debates, and artificial intelligence tools now provide teachers with access to multiple historical sources and perspectives. Teachers can utilize videos, virtual museums, online newspapers, and digital storytelling platforms to make controversial historical topics more engaging and interactive. For instance, students studying the Aba Women's Riot of 1929 or the #EndSARS movement can access photographs, documentaries, eyewitness testimonies, and online interviews that enrich historical understanding. Akinpelu and Bolarinwa (2021) argued that ICT integration improves students' participation and comprehension in history education by promoting interactive and learner-centered instruction.

Another prospect lies in the revitalization of history education in Nigeria. The reintroduction and renewed emphasis on history as a school subject has generated growing public interest in historical consciousness and national memory. This renewed attention creates favorable conditions for teachers to address previously neglected controversial historical topics in schools. Many educational stakeholders now recognize that the absence of historical knowledge contributed to civic ignorance and weak national identity among youths. Consequently, there is increasing advocacy for a history curriculum that reflects indigenous experiences, local realities, and contemporary societal challenges (Federal Ministry of Education, 2022). Ogunyemi (2023) noted that the revival of history education in Nigeria has strengthened public awareness of the importance of historical literacy for national development.

Additionally, teaching controversial historical issues can promote peacebuilding and conflict prevention. Many violent conflicts in Nigeria originate from historical misconceptions, stereotypes, and distorted narratives passed from one generation to another. Classroom discussions that objectively examine contentious historical events can help correct misinformation and reduce prejudice among students. For example, careful teaching about farmer-herder conflicts, religious riots, or ethnic tensions can encourage understanding rather than hostility. Students exposed to balanced historical narratives are more likely to embrace dialogue and peaceful conflict resolution in adulthood. According to Ezeani and Salihu (2022), controversial history teaching serves as an instrument for promoting social harmony and reducing intergroup tensions in diverse societies.

Finally, the teaching of controversial historical issues enhances students' global awareness and intellectual maturity. Contemporary educational systems increasingly emphasize global citizenship education, intercultural understanding, and historical consciousness. By studying controversial historical events within Nigeria and across the world, students learn how societies confront difficult pasts and pursue reconciliation. Discussions on apartheid in South

Africa, the Holocaust in Europe, slavery, colonialism, and civil rights movements can help Nigerian students compare global historical experiences with local realities. Such comparative learning broadens students' worldview and prepares them for participation in an interconnected global society. Adeleke and Eze (2023) affirmed that controversial issue instruction broadens learners' perspectives and strengthens intercultural understanding among students.

Educational Implications of Teaching Controversial Historical Issues

Teaching controversial historical issues has significant educational implications for learners, teachers, schools, and society at large. In contemporary education, controversial historical issues such as colonialism, civil wars, ethnic conflicts, slavery, apartheid, political violence, and religious intolerance are increasingly recognized as important components of history education because they help students develop critical understanding of society and human experiences. Scholars argue that exposing students to multiple historical perspectives enables them to become analytical thinkers who can evaluate evidence objectively rather than accept historical narratives blindly (Alvén, 2024). Through classroom discussions of controversial historical events, students learn how to examine sources critically, compare differing viewpoints, and construct informed conclusions based on historical facts. This strengthens historical thinking skills and promotes intellectual maturity among learners.

Another important educational implication is the promotion of democratic values and civic competence. The teaching of controversial historical issues encourages dialogue, tolerance, respect for diversity, and peaceful disagreement among students. In many multicultural societies, classrooms consist of learners from different ethnic, religious, and political backgrounds; therefore, discussing sensitive historical matters helps students appreciate opposing opinions while maintaining mutual respect. Research indicates that controversial issue teaching contributes to civic education by preparing students to participate responsibly in democratic societies through reasoned debate and informed decision-making (Stitzlein, 2024). For example, discussions on the Nigerian Civil War, apartheid in South Africa, or the transatlantic slave trade can help students understand the dangers of ethnic hatred, discrimination, and political intolerance, thereby promoting national unity and peaceful coexistence. According to Karousiou, Vrikki, and Evagorou (2025), controversial historical discussions also create opportunities for learners to develop civic consciousness and social responsibility within democratic societies.

Furthermore, teaching controversial historical issues enhances students' empathy and moral development. When students engage with painful or difficult histories, they begin to understand the emotions, struggles, and experiences of people who lived in the past. Alvén (2024) explains that historical empathy allows learners to interpret historical actions within their social and cultural contexts rather than making shallow judgments. This educational outcome helps students become more compassionate and socially responsible individuals. For instance, studying genocide, racial segregation, terrorism, or institutional discrimination may

inspire learners to reject injustice and defend human rights in their contemporary societies. Similarly, Scribner (2020) maintains that engaging students with difficult historical violence deepens their understanding of ethical responsibility and social realities. Such lessons can encourage students to become advocates for peace, justice, and tolerance in their communities. The teaching of controversial historical issues also improves communication and problem-solving skills among students. Classroom debates, group discussions, and inquiry-based learning activities require learners to present arguments logically, listen carefully to others, and defend their opinions with evidence. Such participatory learning methods make history lessons more interactive and meaningful compared to rote memorization. Dabbs (2025) observed that collaborative historical inquiry activities reduced students' resistance to sensitive topics and encouraged active engagement with social issues. Consequently, students develop confidence in public speaking, negotiation, and critical reasoning, which are essential skills for academic and professional success. In addition, controversial issue teaching promotes independent learning because students are encouraged to investigate historical evidence from multiple sources before reaching conclusions (Stitzlein, 2024).

However, the educational implications are not entirely positive, as teaching controversial historical issues may also create classroom tension and emotional discomfort if not properly managed. Teachers may encounter conflicts arising from students' personal beliefs, family backgrounds, or political identities. Some learners may feel offended or emotionally disturbed when discussing traumatic historical experiences connected to their communities. This situation places greater responsibility on teachers to use balanced pedagogical approaches, maintain neutrality, and create inclusive classroom environments. Karousiou et al. (2025) emphasize that teachers require adequate professional training and institutional support to effectively handle sensitive and controversial discussions in schools. Without proper preparation, controversial issue teaching may result in bias, misunderstanding, or classroom conflict. Therefore, educational systems must equip teachers with appropriate instructional strategies, historical resources, and conflict-management skills to ensure productive classroom engagement.

Overall, the teaching of controversial historical issues has far-reaching educational implications because it promotes critical thinking, democratic participation, empathy, communication skills, and moral consciousness among learners. Although challenges such as emotional tension and ideological disagreement may arise, effective teaching strategies can transform controversial history into a valuable tool for national development, peaceful coexistence, and responsible citizenship in modern societies (Alvén, 2024; Stitzlein, 2024).

Conclusion

The study examined the teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools and established that such issues are essential for promoting critical thinking, national consciousness, tolerance, and responsible citizenship among students. It revealed that although teachers face challenges such as inadequate instructional materials, insufficient training, fear of bias, and poor curriculum implementation, the teaching of controversial historical issues

remains important for national unity and democratic development. The study further noted that growing interest in history education, curriculum reforms, and digital learning opportunities provide positive prospects for effective history teaching in Nigeria. Therefore, effective teaching of controversial historical issues requires trained teachers, adequate resources, supportive policies, and learner-centered instructional approaches to achieve meaningful educational and societal development.

Recommendations

Government at both federal and state levels should organize regular training, workshops, and seminars for history and social studies teachers on effective strategies for teaching controversial historical issues in secondary schools. This will improve teachers' confidence, neutrality, and pedagogical competence.

Curriculum planners and educational authorities should revise the history curriculum to include balanced and well-structured controversial historical topics such as the Nigerian Civil War, colonialism, ethnic conflicts, military rule, and democratic transitions in ways that promote critical thinking and national unity.

Schools should be provided with adequate instructional materials including textbooks, digital resources, documentaries, archives, and historical records that present multiple perspectives on controversial historical events.

Teachers should adopt learner-centred teaching approaches such as debates, discussions, role play, inquiry methods, and problem-solving strategies to encourage active student participation and democratic classroom interaction.

Educational institutions should create safe and inclusive classroom environments where students can freely express opinions on sensitive historical issues without fear of discrimination, intimidation, or bias.

Government and educational stakeholders should improve funding for history education to support teacher development, instructional resources, educational excursions, and the integration of technology in history teaching.

Parents, communities, and media organizations should support schools in promoting historical awareness, tolerance, peaceful coexistence, and respect for diverse historical perspectives among students.

Researchers should conduct further empirical studies on the teaching of controversial historical issues in Nigerian secondary schools, especially in different geopolitical zones, to provide more evidence-based solutions to existing challenges.

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