

## **Educational reform in Nigeria: the case of Multicultural Education for Peace, Love, and Tolerance**

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*The cohesion of our multicultural societies depends on mutual understanding, engaging proactively in co-operation between different communities and respecting one another. This paper deals with the educational philosophy of a well-known Turkish Islamic scholar, Fethullah Gülen and its application to schools in Nigeria. Gülen- inspired schools in Nigeria are peace islands in the ocean of violence, and promote love, greater empathy, tolerance and peace in a society deeply divided along ethnic, religious, tribal and geographical lines. Following Gülen's example, the schools promote respect for other cultures and the trains of thought of various well-known scholars. Students, throughout their education, learn to appreciate other faiths, ethnicities and cultures, as well as their own. This article reports on a 2010 qualitative field study conducted at the Nigerian Turkish International Colleges (NTICs) in Abuja, Nigeria. In this qualitative inquiry, the researchers used observations, in- depth individual interviews and focus groups to elicit the lived experience of four identified groups of stakeholders (administrators, teachers, students and parents). Participants in this study comprised 22 adults, of which 9 were females and 13 males, aged 16 to 61 ( M = 28.9). The findings indicate that the Gülenian style of education, as it is implemented in Nigeria, and according to the reflections of those participants involved with NTICs, exposes students to people from different parts of Nigeria, as well as people who often are from different ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. The organisation of the school and the school activities allow students to experience those differences in a safe setting, resulting in their learning to appreciate one another.*

**Keywords:** love, Nigeria, peace, qualitative study, tolerance

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, a strikingly beautiful, multicultural country (its people derive from nearly 250 cultures and languages), is a constitutional republic comprised of 36 states and one Federal Capital Territory (Abuja). Colonised by the British in the late nineteenth century, Nigeria gained its independence in 1960 and since then has, on the one hand, developed into a leading state in West Africa, but on the other hand has suffered a half-century of deadly internal conflict and political corruption and instability. From the late 1960s, when Christian Ibos in the east and Muslim Hausas in the north faced off in a bitter civil war, Nigeria's well-being has been repeatedly threatened by inter-religious and inter-tribal conflict, and observers estimate that more than 10,000 people have died in religious clashes since 1999 alone (Falola & Heaton, 2008). In addition, it is striking to notice that the country is the location of both extraordinary wealth (one-

fifth of US oil comes from Nigeria) and crushing poverty (US Energy Information Administration, 2010). It is also true that education of reasonable quality is available to the wealthy, but severely limited for the poor.

Moreover, according to the World Bank (2009), approximately 37% of the population is illiterate – the lowest rate in sub-Saharan Africa. Fewer than 60% hold a high school diploma and college education is available to few (Odia & Omofonmwan, 2007). Education is the essential means for moving the country from an impoverished country to a modern nation that embraces democratic principles of governance. The opportunity for modernisation is made real by the country's oil wealth, although it currently benefits only a few because of corruption in government (Steyn, 2010). In light of this reality, a number of institutions, including government, are focusing on building out the system of education to reduce societal inequities. One of the prominent players in the educational restructuring is the Nigerian Turkish International Colleges (NTICs), a group of 17 schools and a university created by Turkish nationals based on the teachings of the well-known Turkish intellectual Fethullah Gülen. Seventeen NTIC schools in Nigeria adopted the Gülen approach and aim to empower youth through the promotion of education for economic prosperity, tolerance, altruism and peace.

### Gülen Movement

Fethullah Gülen, a Turkish Islamic scholar, philosopher and educational activist, is internationally renowned for his widely lauded messages of tolerance, peace, intercultural dialogue and mutual understanding. The Gülen Movement is a transnational civic society movement inspired by Fethullah Gülen (Çetin, 2010; Clinton, 2008). Millions of people around the world, inspired by Gülen, act collectively to build schools, universities, dialogue centres and charitable organisations under the title *Hizmet* (service) (Ebaugh, 2010).

The millions are inspired by Gülen's educational philosophy which stresses teaching "by example" and the cultivation of "good behaviour" (Aslandoğan & Çetin, 2007; Park, 2008). Gülen's educational institutions, initially developed in Turkey in the early 1980s, spread to the countries that were once a part of the Soviet Union and then to Asia, Europe and Africa. Currently there are Gülen-inspired schools in 140 countries and it is the global scale of the Gülen's Movement's outreach that has attracted attention.

### Gülen-inspired schools

Many researchers have shown the effectiveness of the Gülenian approach in the world. Solberg (2005), for example, argues that the Gülen-inspired schools are perceived to be institutions of effective practice by some state authorities and members of the public. For instance, Gülen-inspired schools have received high praise for their educational quality, as demonstrated by the student's high scores in international and national scientific competitions in Central Asia, Europe, East Africa and Bosnia (Clement,

2007; Ebaugh, 2010; Kalyoncu, 2007; Keles, 2007; Solberg, 2005). Additionally, in the Philippines, Michel (2008) found Gülen-inspired schools were able to promote openness, peace and dialogue in a society that is deeply divided along ethnic and religious lines. Nigeria has also been critically torn by religious and ethnic differences. During the last decade thousands of people were killed in conflicts between Muslims and Christians, between Northerners and Southerners, and between Hausa Fulanis, Yorubas, Igbos, and other tribes (Gambrell, 2010).

Consequently, within this environment where Muslims, Christians, other religious groups, students and teachers have to work and study side by side, a question worth asking is whether or not particular types of schools, in particular the Gülen-inspired schools, have been able to contribute to building democracy, and whether they have the potential to raise future leaders for a democratic society through educational programmes for African youth?

In Nigeria the NTICs were started in 1998 in a rented building with three students and 13 teachers and only a boys' hostel. The schools are private institutions operating under an agreement with the Nigerian Government under the name Nigerian Turkish International Colleges (NTICs) and are run by SURAT Educational Institutions Limited. NTICs are science-oriented secondary schools, established throughout Nigeria, to contribute to the existing relationship between Turkey and Nigeria in the area of education. SURAT operates several campuses around Nigeria and other parts of West Africa, with most campuses accommodating a pre-school, an elementary school and one or more secondary schools. SURAT has also built a university in Abuja.

The organisation currently operates 17 colleges located in six states, namely, one in Abuja, Nigeria's capitol, and the others in Lagos, Kanu, Kaduna, Yobe and Ponta states.

## **Method**

This study employed a qualitative methodology with 22 participants. In this qualitative study, participants were exposed to the broader ideas of a multicultural world and the opportunities to engage and refine their personal perspectives and share freely of their rich cultural traditions and background. It is through such an education that a respectful and fully integrated world manifests. Data for this study were collected from four NTIC schools in one campus in Abuja, Nigeria.

This paper is based on interviews conducted and observations made in NTICs over a period of three weeks. Focus on Gülen-inspired schools was precipitated by Gülen's philosophical notions that are directly concerned with things such as education for economic prosperity, peace and harmony amongst people, and principles of altruism as the basis for institutions serving a society.

Data were collected to answer questions regarding the effectiveness of NTIC schools and, in particular, the Gülen approach, in addressing the conflicts between ethnic and religious factions that continuously disrupt civil society in the country. To

obtain information about this issue the researcher interviewed three principals, seven teachers, seven students and three parents. Interviews were also conducted with two government officials, namely, the former Minister of Education and the current General Director of Education for the Federal Capital Territory of Abuja.

### **Data analysis**

To answer the research question the researcher gathered and analysed a significant amount of data, as qualitative research demands. Because of the amount of data, the collected information had to be maintained in an organised fashion (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Huberman & Miles, 1983; Merriam, 1998; Stake, 1994; Yin, 2003). Aydin (2011) states that all the individual and focus group interviews are to be recorded and transcribed verbatim then filed in such a way as to reflect the means by which the material was collected as well as the order of collection.

As far as the data analysis is concerned, the researcher was cognisant of Patton (2002:390), who, in describing the process of inductive analysis, advises that “the patterns, themes and categories of analysis come from the data; they emerge out of the data rather than being imposed on them prior to data collection and analysis”. This analysis process began after the first individual interviews were transcribed and the observation notes reviewed. Marshall & Rossman (1989:115) argue that “the phase of data analysis is the most difficult, complex, ambiguous, creative and fun” component of qualitative research. At the onset of analysis, the researcher began making notes regarding the nature of the data and identifying possible themes or trends from the initial transcriptions and observation notes.

After reading through the transcripts in search of “underlying meaning”, as suggested by Creswell (2003:155), the researcher compared responses from the interviewed participants to discover themes that would emerge. These transcripts were then shared with peers whose areas of inquiry are varied and different from that of the researcher in order to check the potential explanatory power of various emergent themes (Aydin, 2011). Here, the researcher enrolled peers as “debriefers” to provide “an external check on the inquiry process,” as is recommended by Lincoln & Guba (1985:301).

As the remaining individual and focus-group interviews were transcribed and read, the researcher began making notes in the margins of the transcriptions to summarise the topics that participants discussed. At the same time, he began generating a list of common ideas and possible themes that were repeated or appeared as patterns in the interviews and observation notes reviewed. The last step in the analysis process was the grouping of concepts and ideas into common themes. Each major theme was given a colour code and all transcripts were reread and colour-coded by theme as suggested by Creswell (2003). When themes appeared clear and appropriate to colleagues and the researcher, the themes were analysed in relation to the research question.

### **Limitation of the study**

First of all, in a qualitative study, the findings are not generalisable. Even though the researcher believes the findings of this study to be suggestive of the value of certain practices of NTICs, one should be aware of the fact that it is limited to the age group of the participants, the size of the population and the limited variety of the interviewees, particularly regarding their relationship to the schools studied. In regard to the age of the participants, the researcher interviewed only senior students and students who had graduated from the schools. Consequently, the respondents were limited to a specific age range, and were mostly adults. Some discussion took place with younger students, but only in an informal manner through visits to classrooms and encounters on the school grounds. Furthermore, the number of classes that the researcher observed was limited, with only a few classes visited during the data collection period because of time restrictions. As a result, the study may not have produced data that allow for a complete picture of what occurs in the classrooms. Second, a critical limitation on the type of data that could be collected results from the method used to identify and contact participants. The “snowball” process necessitates that willing participants suggest others who might participate. Participants are therefore limited to those acquainted with others who are already participating. In this case, almost all the participants interviewed were associated with the NTIC schools as students, parents of students, teachers and school administrators. Very few involved in the study were not directly involved with the NTIC schools, and most of those had a continuing affiliation with the schools – a factor that could have a biasing effect on the data.

Third, the generalisability of this study is impacted by its small sample size and three-week research period. While every effort was made to gather multiple data in the form of interviews, observations and field-notes of data to enhance the possibility of drawing valid and legitimate generalisations, research on the NTIC schools needs to be done over a longer period of time with a larger sample of schools, such as the NTIC schools in other states in Nigeria, as well as schools not in the NTIC network. Because of travel and time limitations, this study only examined NTIC schools at the Abuja campus.

The fourth limitation was that the researcher did not have an opportunity to observe students interacting with one another outside of the NTICs campus or with others who were not affiliated with the NTICs. Therefore, it is not possible to know for certain whether the demonstrated ability of students at the NTICs to get along with others from backgrounds different from their own carried over into life beyond school.

### **Findings**

The research question, interview questions and observations were designed to allow for examination of the perceptions and outlook of participants involved in Gülen-inspired schools in Abuja. It should be said at the outset that almost all of the interviewees indicated that they have a positive attitude toward the Gülen philosophy and believe that the Gülen educational practices are a positive force in guiding the design

of school programmes. They were aware of the fact that the schools are founded by volunteers inspired by Gülen's ideas and not by Gülen himself.

The Gülen influence was apparent from the beginning. The first interviewee, Hasan Huseyin Aygun, the General Director of Nigerian Turkish International Colleges and owner of the schools in Abuja and several more in other states of Nigeria, indicated that he was responsible for all aspects of school operation, including school administration, curriculum, teaching and finance. In a three-hour interview, he explained that it was the Gülen philosophy that pushed him to undertake the building of the schools. While Gülen does not have much influence on the day-to-day operations of the schools, Aygun said that Gülen's writings provide a philosophical foundation, a humane notion of how one should conduct oneself in this world as a single human being amongst many, all worthy, all in need of certain basic things to live decently. These notions guide those involved in the school in their treatment of others.

With the Gülenian emphasis always in mind, the analysis of the data produced many themes and focused on the most frequently occurring ideas related to the two comprehensive research concerns, namely the success of the schools and the manner in which the schools operate. *Love, tolerance and peace* are often spoken of in Gülenian circles, and certainly when discussing the NTIC schools with those involved in the programme.

#### Themes: Love, Tolerance and Peace

The qualitatively derived body of data collected for this study suggests that the schools do operate as a secular alternative to public schools and other private schools that are more closely allied to particular religious and ethnic/tribal institutions. As such, the NTIC schools appear to provide a means for breaking down barriers that prevent resolution of the ethno-religious differences that too often lead to clashes, some terribly violent, between Nigeria's Christians and Muslims, between tribes, and between people of the different geographical regions. The ethno-religious characters of the student bodies in the public schools generally reflect the segregated nature of the society. Students attend schools in which they rarely have the opportunity to meet others with backgrounds different from their own. In the Gülen-inspired schools, however, there are Muslims, Christians and non-believers, as well as students from 191 different ethnic backgrounds and all of the geographical regions. All NTIC students receive the same education and live peacefully together in a setting that inspires understanding, tolerance and, it seems, even love. As a result of their experiences in living and attending classes with those from different ethnic, religious and geographical backgrounds, students come to know other students and appreciate others for who they *really* are. The Gülen philosophy's emphasis on love, tolerance and peace is understood by those involved with the NTIC schools as essential for solving the terribly disruptive features of Nigerian society.

*Theme One: Love*

Gülen (2004) defines love as an elixir; a human lives with love, is made happy by love and makes those around him or her happy with love for others and for all of humankind. During the interviews, the word “love” was repeated 136 times by participants and it is clear that school staff members consciously make an effort to engage in a rhetoric of love to encourage students to love one another. A Nigerian male teacher said that Gülen always defines humanism as a doctrine of love and humanity and that the humanistic message is consistently made clear to the students. One student confirmed the teacher’s point, stating that:

People in this school teach us to LOVE our country. The idea of love goes beyond that of simply loving one another. Not only should one love others and share with others, but each individual should love the country of Nigeria. Through the love of the country, each individual will work to help the country and, therefore, will help to make the country better. The school is teaching its students to love their country.

This focus on love is also highlighted by one of the NTICs administrators, who said that:

The idea that we have gotten from school is that we have to know that we are all one family. We are all one family and we need to share ideas and we need to share love. We need to share whatever we have with one another. We need not be selfish with our ideas.

In other words, that means that *the one* to be considered as a family member is everyone in Nigeria, or Turkey, or even the World. The school, through Gülen’s educational paradigm, sends the message that people must all love one another. There must be an awareness of others and a love for them. To show our love we should share our ideas.

As can be seen, the three stakeholders (teachers, students and parents), who are directly involved in the educational enterprise of NTICs, agree on the importance of the concept of love in the school programmes. Another Nigerian male teacher pointed out that:

Love of your country! Fethullah Gülen emphasises “love” many times in his books. I think he means by “love your country” for one to be patriotic. Actually, from the first year (J-1) to the last year (S-3) of graduation, we are trying to enlighten students about their country, to love their nation. Therefore, throughout Gülen’s writings, he encourages his volunteers to teach students about loving one another as a human beings and loving their country. Then they will help their country’s development, being arbiters in the future.

To counter the exodus, students are being taught, throughout their education, about their country and patriotic values. The hope is that students will want to help their country and will choose to remain in the country and that those who receive their education in another country will return to Nigeria once finished.

In addition to infusing these patriotic values, based upon Gülen’s notions of love,

the school also emphasises the related principles of peace and mutual understanding. A Turkish female teacher, in describing her observations of students, said: "Actually I saw peace and love in the students' eyes, to their teachers and, between, and among them. I saw peace." She said this while explaining why she chose to teach at a school that embraced elements of the Gülen philosophy. Upon visiting the school she saw students acting in ways that demonstrated both love and peace. She felt that she could sense that love in the interactions occurring between students and teachers.

Multiple statements regarding this loving interaction between students and teachers were captured during the interviews, with the students expressing loving respect for the teachers and the teachers building loving, caring relationships with the students. One student reports that many in his school consider their teachers to be their "senior brothers". He says:

OK! Here in NTICs, I have learnt a lot of change. Teachers are very respectful to us both in classrooms and outside. They are always mentoring us to be a right human being and they are not ignoring us when we need help. For example, when a student falls in any danger s/he is easily picked out of it. Morally wise, every week we have guardians who supervise us. They just act as our parents. We even call them "*abi*" which means senior brother in Turkish languages.

Students emphasise that the relationships that exist between students and teachers are so valuable that people looking at the school can tell that the students experiencing the Gülen philosophy act differently than students in other schools. A teacher echoed this notion of visible love and concern for others saying:

I understand that if the students love the teacher, I think the teaching will be okay. There is a strong belief held by the teachers that it is their responsibility to show love to the students. This love may be shown in the extra work and dedication they put into spending time with the students and building relationships with students. This also motivates students to improve their academic achievement because of mutual respect and understanding between teachers and students.

Love is understood to be a component of the school atmosphere that is related to academic achievement. As one student said:

Something I noticed about the quality of teachers' background is their allegiance to teaching. For example, our biology teacher, he is very dedicated to teaching us. We are enjoying his class because we learn a lot and he teaches from his heart. He is so respectful to us. Whenever we ask questions, he responds very politely and also, he makes a lot of jokes while he is teaching and answering our questions. So when we see him outside we show him the proper respect, the due respect, and we also have fun with him. We play with him and we know when it is time to be serious and when it is time just to have fun.

Parents are quite happy with what their children experience in these schools that emphasise love and tolerance along with academic achievement. One of them openly said that, "this generation solves all the problems because of tolerance and peace and they

will live by love". There is a belief that the school is teaching the Gülen philosophy of love, peace and tolerance and that the students are embracing these ideas. According to participants, the students are learning to live by love. They believe that when the students grow up and live by love, they will be able to solve the problems of Nigeria. As one Nigerian administrator insisted:

The part [of Gülen education] that I think has been helpful to Nigerian education and Nigerian society is the part of preaching peace and love ... sharing love. You know, of sharing love with others, with the poor, with the rich, seeing ourselves as one. Then the other one is helping another one, not being a selfish person. Whatever we have we should try to share it with others, and also encourage others to share their belongings with the poor.

Already discussed above, but worthy of revisiting because of its importance to the future of the Nigerian nation, is the topic of students' willingness and capacity, through love, to address the problems confronted by the country. A major goal of the NTIC programme is to develop future leaders. A Nigerian female administrator at the NTIC Abuja campus addresses this facet of NTICs education saying that, through Gülen's influence in having schools teach about love, the schools have started to teach the specific skills of showing love in ways such as helping those who are living with poverty. Through the act of helping the poor, you can help to save Nigeria."

A part of the Gülen philosophy is the rhetoric of love and, as Wright (2007) states, it is an inspirational philosophy of which the essence is education in action, teaching love, tolerance and mutual cultural respect. Love is a part of the Gülen philosophy emphasised throughout school, and love is modelled in the classrooms and understood to be important by most participants. Through love, participants stressed, people develop humane qualities, good behaviour, love for others, enthusiasm for self-improvement and an active desire to serve others, make a difference in the world, and persevere in the face of setbacks and failures.

## Theme Two: Tolerance

Throughout the interviews, the word "tolerance" was repeated 107 times by participants. In Gülen's writings, tolerance is said to be compassion and love. What tolerance means in this context is that the tolerant person simply allows others to exist without interference, in their own realms of thought, even if one disagrees with those thoughts. In Gülen's use of the term, tolerance means more than simply abiding by the ideas with which one agrees; it means accepting others with whom one disagrees, genuinely embracing those others' viewpoints. In accordance with the Gülen educational philosophy, NTICs use a two-pronged approach in teaching tolerance to students. On one hand, the students are taught about tolerance in their character/moral education classes. Students pointed out that they are learning from these courses how to tolerate others, whatever their backgrounds, and to respect all points of view because they are the product of human thought.

On the other hand, tolerance is taught through the living conditions in the schools where the behaviour of teachers and fellow students are based upon the knowledge and attitudes that allow one to live peacefully with those who are different from oneself. A student voiced a belief commonly repeated in the statements of others. As I have learned to accept people for who they are, he said, "because of this school filled with diverse students, diverse people with different tribes, and different backgrounds and different religions; we learn tolerance – and dialogue in this school." And, as an NTIC graduate reported: "this school helps us to learn how to live together peacefully with students from different backgrounds".

The data convincingly show that participants are highly aware of the schools' emphasis on tolerance and its value in the programmes. One parent stressed that:

Once the students learn about tolerance with their classmates who are black or white and who come from different tribal and religious backgrounds in the classroom, they practise being tolerant from their teachers, because they learn and see how their teachers tolerate and help all students equally, those who are children of presidents, governors, state officials, and those who are children from very poor families. It does not matter because they receive the same education from the same teachers and the same schools.

It is also clear that, amongst participants, there is an awareness that, in teaching tolerance, the schools are taking advantage of Gülen's ideas to address the problems of Nigeria. The schools, it appears, are teaching students to live together with students from different backgrounds, and succeeding. This is evident in the ways former students talk about how their experiences helped them to learn tolerance so that they were prepared to meet others when they went to college. One put it like this:

One of the Nigerian problems is a conflict related to geographical lines. For example, Northern Nigeria is where most Christians live and Southern Nigeria is where, dominantly, Muslims live and there is always a conflict between these people. However, as NTICs offer education within a boarding school setting, so, students from all over the country live and eat together at least six years at these schools. This togetherness breaks geographical lines and will help future Nigerian society.

The data also show that, from the participants' perspective, Gülen's philosophy will surely be used by students when they leave the NTICs to create a better society – one based on geographical harmony – and a populace alert to the importance of education and the pursuit of knowledge. The data suggest that the generation currently attending the NTIC schools is learning tolerance. These students are learning how to interact with people of different ethnicities and religions. At the same time, within the NTIC community, there is awareness of the fact that parents, through their children, are learning about tolerance, and a part of this is tolerance for the ideas their children are learning in the schools. As one Nigerian female teacher said:

You must respect your children, your child, anybody. You must respect their

feelings; because the same thing can happen to you. And like the current generation, as I was saying, you can't be the way you were brought up; it is not the same way that I was brought up and is not the same way you will bring up a child that is just two years old. The generation is changing.

Parents are discovering that their children are learning things that are different from what they (the parents) were taught. Through their children, their attitudes are changed and they embrace the lessons in tolerance their children bring home. A Nigerian female teacher enthusiastically said: "We tell them to respect everybody. You must respect everybody's feelings; you must respect everybody's religion even though your opinions are different from that person's opinions."

For some parents, such ideas may be difficult to accept, but they send their children to the schools and, thus, are given reason to tolerate others and ideas with which they may have difficulty agreeing.

The schools are, in overt ways, working to teach tolerance for everyone with the hope that such teaching will alleviate the animosities contributing to the strife that is now so much a part of life in Nigerian society. According to those involved with the schools the tolerance being taught and demonstrated by teachers, this tolerance of others' religions and feelings, is good for the productivity of the schools and good for the country. A Turkish female teacher said "... if you respect each other's religion and you respect your feelings, you tend to work together, not minding where such a person comes from and what such a person is doing. Just respect that person". The guiding Gülenian philosophy tells one that the absence of tolerance is a lack of respect for the feelings of others. Time is wasted and, therefore, effectiveness is undercut when a focus is on where a person is from (Botha, 2010) or what his or her religious beliefs are, rather than what that person can contribute to the good of the whole.

Participants in the study are aware that tolerance is promoted in the schools in other ways than through direct instruction. They regularly reported that tolerance permeates the culture of the schools. As one Turkish female teacher observed: "all children are together; we don't separate them, we don't segregate, and we don't discriminate." Tolerance at the NTICs is *the* way of life and the parents are keenly aware of this. Almost everybody interviewed for the study had come to believe in the ethic. One participant said:

The way I see people is the way they are being ... the way they relate with me ... You may be a Christian and you are terrible and rubbish ... you may be Muslim... So the important thing is the way you relate with me... that is the way, the way I appraise ... uh ... people's religion. In fact it does not depend on whether you are a Christian or Muslim.

There is growing understanding in the broader NTIC community that people can work together despite their different religious beliefs as long as they are tolerant of the differences that exist. Community members, whether they are students, teachers, administrators or parents, often express the belief that the lessons of tolerance taught by

these Gülen-inspired schools are relevant and important. The father of an NTIC student, the husband in a mixed-religion couple, responded to the questions regarding the teachings of tolerance saying:

I'm a Muslim and she [my wife] is a Christian ... there is tolerance and then ... there is understanding ... so is very relevant, and we are living together. These parents have been able to be together through tolerance and love. Consequently, they feel that the school's message is very relevant.

Teachers consistently declare their personal *buy-in* to the Gülen belief in teaching tolerance. A Nigerian male teacher reports that:

There is no division problem; it is solved in this school by taking care of them and showing tolerance. Teachers here in this school tolerate all students from different ethnic backgrounds and promote mutual understanding between all people – Turkish – white – black, as well as other tribes. So this is also one of the unique things about these schools.

The teachers feel that the emphasis on tolerance is unique to the schools that are built around Gülen beliefs. To this point, a Turkish male teacher said, "I read a lot of Gülen's articles and books ... He always talks about teaching with peace, tolerance, unity and encouraging education that helps people tolerate other people through education." They see the importance of education in their reading of Gülen. Their job of providing education, they say, is important because it promotes tolerance amongst their students. As a parent says, "they are equal, no matter your – [ethnicity] – no matter your money, no matter the type of religion, and no matter your class – everybody is equal."

As mentioned earlier, Nigeria experiences considerable strife resulting from religious differences. One student had this to say of the situation:

Actually among the average Muslim, average Christian, and average other religions there are still conflicts. When we come here we are all under the same umbrella; they make us understand that religion is between you and God. I don't have to make her see things the way I see things, I just have to love her for who she is; individually. Here they make you understand that you are all crystals and you don't have to rub each other.

There is a difference between working with someone to help him or her grow intellectually and a need to convince others to join a religion. According to the students the school's tolerance teachings teach that one can have a religion without finding it necessary to convert others to it. The philosophy that guides school operations causes all who are a part of the schools to demonstrate tolerance. A parent reports that:

You can see the president's child in the school but he is equal with the other ones who are from a poor family. Elite students will enter the school's premises with the same thing that other [poor] children are entering. So, a socio-economic status (SES) disadvantaged students will not be inferior in this school.

Students who graduated from these schools talk about how the school has prepared

them to be tolerant of those from tribes different than their own. As one reported, "... when I was here I didn't really pay attention to anybody's tribe, or religion, you know. I just got along with most of the students. And we used to go for picnics and discussions and all that; there was always a mix of people so I didn't really notice that difference."

In the schools students all work together and spend time together through involvement in social activities, such as playing basketball and going on picnics. The administrators stress the value of such activities for fulfilling the mission described in Gülen's philosophy of education. One Nigerian administrator at NTICs told the researcher that:

These are [Turkish] people who don't mind whether you are black, whether you are white, whether you are a Muslim, whether you are a Christian, all they want is oneness, they want to put everyone together. To achieve one goal, so this is seen as different from the school I am coming from because my previous school had only Christians. Do you understand? I like to work with rich diversity and multiculturalism. So this is one of the reasons why I am here with them.

The social "intermixing" in activities that promote cooperation and that illuminate the joy to be gained through such interaction with people from differing backgrounds greatly aids the quest for harmony. The schools do not focus on the colours of the students' skin or their religions. Many of the administrators interviewed told the researcher that they chose to work at these schools because they believed in the goal of teaching tolerance. They felt that whether one is a Muslim or a Christian, whether one is from the Yoruba tribe or the Hausa tribe, whether one is Turkish, black or white, we all should learn to live together. "This is the idea of the school and this is what I think the Nigerian education needs," said one of the many Nigerians with an administrative role at the school. They argue that NTICs promoting tolerance between the tribes, is about changing the world. The sentiments of those involved with the Gülen schools in Nigeria are summed up in this statement by one of the administrators:

I love the environment because, you know, that after Ramadan, Christian kids let other kids cut in line because they knew the Muslim kids had been fasting. So that is incredible, because here is a person understanding somebody. And this makes me doubt they would ever do harm to each other.

The Gülen principles or philosophy is to accept people whoever they are, wherever they come from, whatever their nationalities and whatever their religion. According to one teacher:

Gülen says: "the world is too big and it's big enough for all of us to live. So these are the ideas we tell our students."

She continued, saying that:

To abide by peace, together with whomever you are with. I accept Gülen's ideas; I think he is right, whatever he says about peace and about education. Whatever I learn from him I also tell my students, tell my colleagues and tell my staff. I am a Muslim and some people might think this is a Muslim school, but it is not. There

is nothing done here to teach students the Muslim religion and nothing to convert students to Muslims, so it is not an issue in our schools.

Tolerance is a major tenet of Gülen-directed education. This is obvious in the manner in which students conduct themselves and interact with one another. It appears that the schools' emphasis on tolerance is having the desired effect on students and everyone else who is associated with the schools.

### Theme Three: Peace

Peace is the other dominant theme in the data. It was repeated 87 times by participants. Peace is the hoped for result of the love and tolerance being taught. For a country like Nigeria, this is paramount because Nigeria experiences so much strife related to the religious, ethnic, regional and socio-economic backgrounds of its people. The NTIC schools are teaching a type of collaboration, where individuals do not fight one another over their individual differences. As one of the parents emphasised:

I see NTICs as "*Peace Islands*" as they provide a safe harbour for our children from all walks of life, and also following NTICs examples, the schools promote respect for other cultures and thoughts of life. Throughout their education students learn to appreciate other faiths and cultures as well as their own.

The notion of *peace islands* comes from Rumi (Michel, 2008), a philosopher who greatly influenced Gülen. As the General Director, explained:

Gülen is following the thought of Rumi, a popular thinker and philosopher in the early 13th century. Gülen, like Rumi, promotes opening one's mind and heart to all beliefs and cultures and have a seat in their heart for any person no matter what the other's background is. Come, come, whoever you are, says Rumi.

Gülen goes beyond that and encourages everyone to reach out to the other. That is, even if they do not come to you, you take the first step, go to others and establish a medium of dialogue. Following the examples of Rumi and Gülen, our schools [NTICs] establish bridges or "peace islands", closing the gap among various ethnic identity nations and societies.

This response is directly related to NTICs' desire to lead the country forward in a peaceful manner to ensure a peaceful future for generations to come. This objective of teaching peace is also clearly stated by one Turkish teacher, who said, "We prepare to teach our students and our children how to live in peace together because there are a lot of tribal and religious clashes here and many non-educated people in Nigeria."

To one parent, the results are obvious.

"Actually, there is peace in this school and this school brings to peace building within educational activities to our children. When I visit this school campus, I see that the students are interacting and collaborating with each other as a brotherhood. So this is an environment that we want to see as Nigerians."

This appears to be a direct consequence of the teachers' strong desire to implement Gülen principles through their teaching. The teachers regularly discuss how Gülen is

to be echoed through their teaching, taking their reading of Gülen into consideration as they plan for teaching. A Nigerian male teacher noted that “peace, love and tolerance are playing a big role in this school. So, at this school they have people, good people with good character, who can help each other and understand, and respect each other wherever you come from.” A Nigerian female teacher added that “This is a very crucial step.” And a parent further emphasised the importance of the peace focus in the development of a country such as Nigeria. “NTIC schools,” she said, “they are teaching our children peace, so love and peace are developing in Nigeria.”

Participants agreed that, through tolerance and love, peace can happen and change can take place. People know of the struggles of Nigeria, because strife and civil war are elements of recent history. The schools, according to those involved with them, exist to create good people to change Nigeria and promote peace in the country. There is a very high expectation of the current school-going generation. These children are being raised to be the generation that solves the problems of Nigeria. The schools have taken on the role of training this generation to live in peace and to promote peace for the country in adulthood.

It is assumed that by teaching students to love others and to tolerate ideas different from one’s own, students will learn how to live in peace with one another and, in adulthood, they will be able to serve as leaders who promote positive change for Nigeria. The school sees its role to be that of change agent, an institution that teaches students about love and tolerance to promote peace and positive change. In general participants emphasised that the education system built on Gülen’s ideas, the school, and those involved with it, will change Nigeria into a peaceful place.

## **Discussion**

Through the use of a qualitative study design three major themes emerged, namely, love, tolerance, and peace. These themes are mentioned by all stakeholder groups. The general consensus appears to be that, while Nigeria is a nation deeply divided along religious, ethnic and class lines, at NTIC schools, Christian, Muslim and other NTIC students live and study side by side and, in the process, build a culture of dialogue and respect while engaged in a programme that leads to high levels of academic achievement. In addition, the study finds that Gülenian education, as it is being implemented in Nigeria, and according to the reflections of those involved with the institutions, does work to expose students to people of different geographical areas of Nigeria, people who often are of different ethnic, religious and socio-economic backgrounds. The organization of and activities at the school allow students to experience people who differ from themselves in a safe setting, which results in their learning to appreciate one another.

A related notion, held to be true by most involved in the study, is that the focus on love, peace and tolerance is important for the development of a new and unified Nigeria. From their inception, NTICs’ commitment to improving conditions in Nigeria

has, according to those involved with NTIC programmes in Nigeria, distinguished them from other international schools and this has earned positive responses from Nigerian officials and parents. For instance, a Nigerian female administrator at the NTIC in Abuja was attracted by the Gülen-inspired schools' philosophy of non-discrimination and peace. She said, "I think the Gülen philosophy has really helped the Nigerian society. These are people who don't mind whether you are black, whether you are white, whether you are a Muslim, whether you are a Christian. All they want is oneness."

The philosophy of inclusion extended itself to everyday life, she concluded. In addition Michel (2003), in his study, underlined that the Gülen-inspired schools are conceived rather in terms of a humanism that is rooted in a particular historical context, but is always aimed at transcending that context. Because of the difference in context, the schools established in countries as diverse as Turkey, Kyrgyzstan, Kenya, Denmark, USA or Brazil are necessarily very different from one another, but are all inspired by the same humanistic vision.

The stated goal of these schools is to empower youth through the promotion of education for economic prosperity, tolerance, altruism, love and peace. This goal reflects the Gülen Movement's notion of the role school programmes, such as those offered in the NTICs in developing nations such as Nigeria. The goal can and should play a role in promoting tolerance, unity, economic prosperity, stability and the establishment of civil society based upon democratic principles of governance. This is achieved by focusing on tolerance as it deals with the educational system of an African nation (Aydin, Lafer & Mahon, 2010).

The participants in the study emphasised that the NTIC schools' practice is to accept students of all religious backgrounds. While religious courses are offered, they are optional or elective. The schools' most important tool for teaching tolerance is allowing students from different religious backgrounds to live together in a safe and pleasant environment where proximity leads to tolerance of diversity (Aydin & Chandler, 2010). Typical of students who had spent time in the NTIC schools, a recent graduate, when asked in a student focus group whether he had learned to deal with diversity as a student, responded by saying, "yes, because when I was here I didn't really pay attention to anybody's tribe or religion, you know. I just got along with most of the students. And we used to go for picnics and discussions, and there was always a mixture of people. So I didn't really notice that difference." Another student said, "I have learned to accept people for who they are because this school is full of diverse students – diverse people from different tribes and different backgrounds and different religions. We learn tolerance – and dialogue." Participants emphasised the fact that Nigeria has, for many decades, had conflicts among people of different backgrounds. Therefore, love, tolerance and peace are important factors for Nigerian society in preventing conflicts. According to Gülen (2004), all aspects of youths' characters, including understanding, tolerance and love, are major concerns in nurturing future

generations. Moreover, Kalyoncu (2008) argues that in conflict-ridden regions such as Afghanistan, Pakistan, the Philippines, Bosnia-Herzegovina, southeast Turkey and northern Iraq, these institutions are known to increase educational opportunities and contribute to communal cohesion, which, in turn, decreases the appeal of terrorist groups operating in these countries with exclusivist agendas.

Furthermore, beyond Nigeria, in nations around the world, the results of this study might be used to build multicultural and intercultural relationships through new school configurations that allow for direct interaction between members of diverse cultural groups. The researcher believes, after careful analysis of the data collected, that the NTIC schools demonstrate the efficacy of the Gülenian philosophy of education, especially in conflict-ridden nations such as Nigeria because, if those participating in the study are right, it may help reduce poverty, promote positive human development, promote peace, aid in conflict resolution and improve educational opportunities. These elements may offer the possibility to decrease religious and tribal violence and address the consequences of exclusivist agendas operating in these countries.

## Conclusion

This paper offers evidence of the contribution of the Gülen-inspired education as implemented in Nigeria. These schools are intentionally diverse in the backgrounds of people attending them, people from different ethnic backgrounds, religions and socio-economic status. Through school activities and Gülenian educational philosophy, it is intended that the students will come into contact with values different from their own, learn how to live and work together and come to appreciate one another. In a nation in which there is considerable conflict among peoples of different backgrounds, this is quite an achievement. Their experiences in these schools provide students with the opportunity to learn to be a generation that respects differences and can both work and live together in peace. NTICs in Abuja are intentionally structured to promote lessons that lead beyond tolerance to true appreciation. Students both live and attend classes with students of different ethnicities and religions. Through this first-hand encounter, they learn lessons vital for the future of Nigeria. Participants believed that the NTIC schools have a lot to contribute to a peaceful future and making the world a better place to live and raise future leaders. More important is the “four schools in one particular campus approach” because it allows students from different religious, ethnic, tribal, SES, and geographical lines to live together side by side.

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