

ASSESSMENT OF THE HISTORICAL DEVELOPMENT OF FORMAL ISLAMIC SCHOOLS IN ILORIN, KWARA STATE, NIGERIA: 1938-2023

Masud Ibrahim ONIYE(Ph.D.)

oniymasud@unilorin.edu.ng +2348033850768

Yunus Olayinka GARBA

olashile4real@gmail.com +2347039814863

Jimoh Adeniyi ALABI(Ph.D.)

alabi.aj@unilorin.edu.ng +2348137455721

Abdulhameed Ishola JIMBA

jimba.ab@unilorin.edu.ng +2347039582625

Department of Arts Education, Faculty of Education, University of Ilorin, Nigeria

Abstract

This study examined the historical development of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938-2023, focusing on their origins, objectives, contributions, and challenges. Using the historical research method, the study targeted stakeholders connected with formal Islamic education, especially schools registered with the Kwara State Arabic Education Board and examined by the National Board for Arabic and Islamic Studies. The population of the study comprised all Islamic schools in Ilorin, Kwara State, Nigeria. A multistage sampling technique was used to select a sample of 265 respondents, including policymakers, implementers, and beneficiaries. Data were collected through questionnaires, interviews, and proforma. The questionnaire was validated via face, content and construct validity and the reliability was established at 0.81 while the interview guide had the reliability coefficient of 0.79 and analyzed using thematic analysis and percentages. Findings showed that formal Islamic schools developed through the influence of reformist scholars and the integration of Western education into Qur'anic learning. The schools promote moral values, civic responsibility, and religious tolerance, with increasing enrolment due to affordability and cultural acceptance. However, inadequate facilities, poor funding, shortage of qualified teachers, and limited government support remain major challenges. The study concluded that, the transformation of traditional Qur'anic schools into formal Islamic educational institutions was influenced by the efforts of Islamic scholars, the impact of Western education, and the need to modernize Islamic teaching and administration. The study recommended among others that more Islamic scholars should be committed to the course of Islam and its propagation to develop Islamic schools in the state.

Keywords: Historical-Development; Formal; Islamic-Schools; Arabic.

Introduction

Islam is a monotheistic religion and a complete way of life revealed by Allah to Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him) as guidance for humanity. It encompasses beliefs, practices, moral values, and social principles rooted in the Qur'an and Hadith. According to Javard (2013), Islam is a universal religion meant for all people regardless of race or background. The religion began in the 7th century when Prophet Muhammad received

the first revelation through Angel Jibril in the Cave of Hira. Within a short period after the Prophet's death, Islam spread rapidly across Asia, Africa, and Europe. During the Islamic Golden Age between the 10th and 13th centuries, Muslim scholars made remarkable contributions to science, mathematics, medicine, astronomy, literature, and philosophy, thereby influencing global civilization significantly.

Islam reached Africa at an early stage when some Muslims migrated to Abyssinia (Ethiopia) to escape persecution in Makkah and were granted refuge by Emperor Najashi. From North Africa, Islam later spread to West Africa and eventually to Northern Nigeria through trade, scholarship, and the exemplary conduct of Muslim traders and preachers. In Nigeria, especially in Ilorin and other Yoruba regions, the spread of Islam was greatly strengthened by the 19th-century Fulani jihad. Before the establishment of the Ilorin Emirate, there was already a Muslim community led by Sholagberu. Over time, Ilorin developed into a major center of Islamic scholarship where people from diverse ethnic backgrounds united under Islamic teachings, making religion a stronger identity marker than language or ancestry.

Islam places enormous importance on education and regards the pursuit of knowledge as a religious obligation for every Muslim. Islamic education combines spiritual, intellectual, moral, and social development based on the teachings of the Qur'an and Hadith. Scholars such as Ibrahima and Afeefa (2020) describe Islamic education as a process that shapes human behavior and decisions according to Islamic ethical values. The Qur'an repeatedly emphasizes the value of knowledge, beginning with the first revelation commanding humanity to "Read" (Q96:1–5), while Q58:11 states that Allah elevates those who possess knowledge. Islamic teachings therefore present education as a means of understanding Allah, fulfilling human responsibilities, and becoming a responsible member of society. The Qur'an and Hadith form the foundation of Islamic education, while other Islamic texts such as Hadith collections, Fiqh books, and scholarly works further support learning and scholarship. Islamic education historically developed through Qur'anic schools known as Kuttab, where reading, writing, and Qur'anic recitation were taught. In Ilorin, Islamic education has existed for centuries and contributed greatly to the city's reputation as a citadel of learning in Southwestern Nigeria. Initially, Islamic education was informal and conducted in mosques, homes, marketplaces, or under trees, with teachers freely establishing schools without formal regulations. Teaching was viewed as a religious and community service, and senior students often assisted in training younger learners. Despite challenges such as language barriers, slow conversion, and limited learning materials, Islamic education continued to flourish.

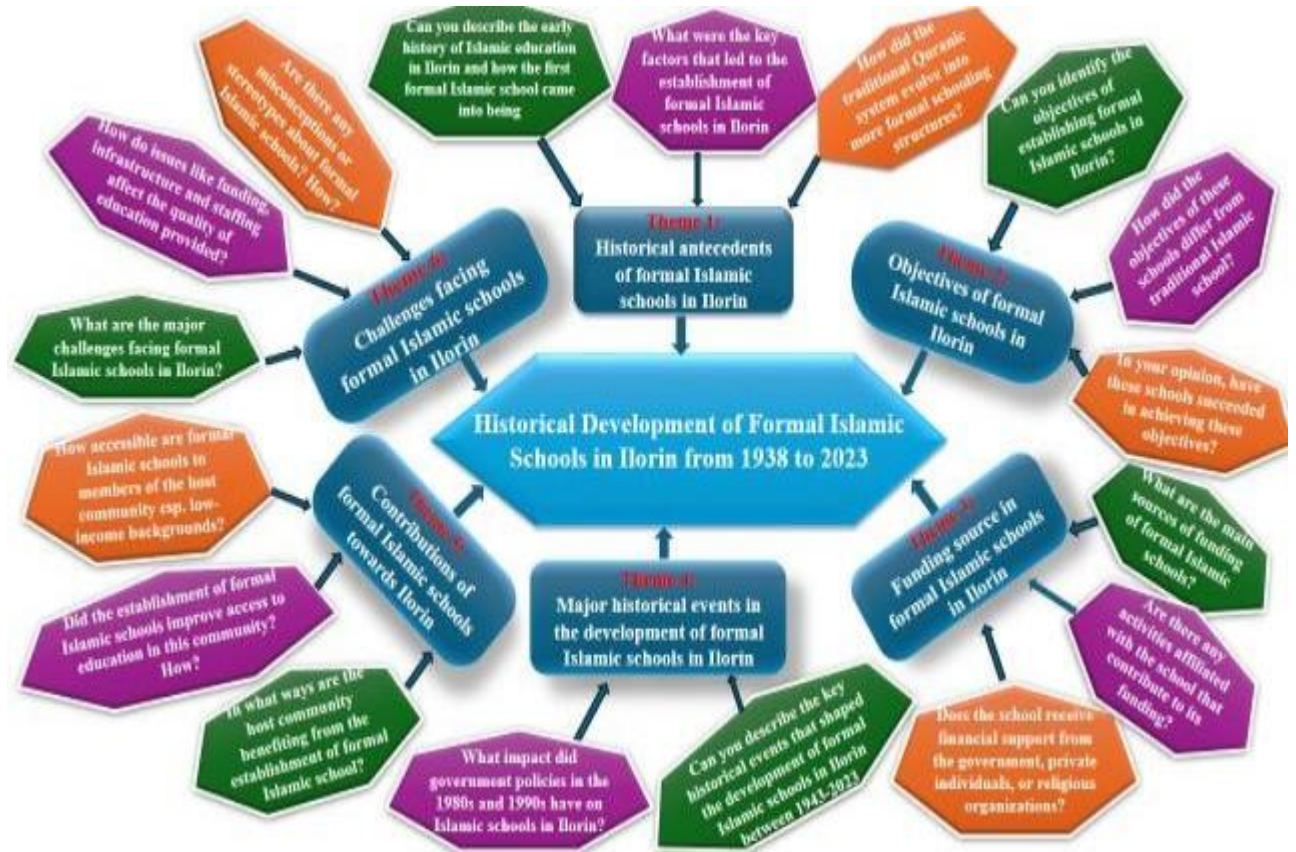


Figure 1: Historical Development of Formal Islamic Schools in Ilorin: 1938-2023

Therefore, responses provided by the selected participants (interviewees) on the historical antecedents of formal Islamic schools, objectives of formal Islamic schools, funding sources in formal Islamic schools, major historical events in the development of formal Islamic schools, contributions of formal Islamic schools to the host community and challenges facing formal Islamic schools in Ilorin, Nigeria.

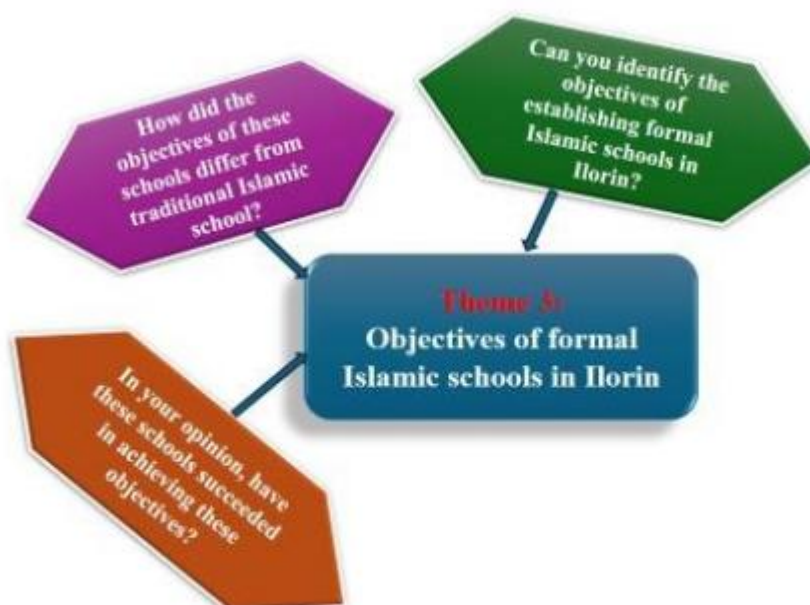


Figure 3: Objectives of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin

The objectives behind the establishment of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin and the extent to which they have achieved their goals. It is evident that these schools were established to preserve Islamic values and identity while integrating secular education to prepare students for both religious and modern societal responsibilities. Unlike traditional Islamic schools that focused mainly on Qur'anic memorization and Arabic literacy, formal Islamic schools adopted broader curricula, modern teaching methods, and certification systems. The study further revealed that the schools have largely achieved their objectives by producing morally upright and academically competent graduates who contribute meaningfully to society. They have also provided credible alternatives to missionary schools and promoted educational access among Muslim families. However, challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of qualified teachers, poor infrastructure, and curriculum improvement still affect their effectiveness.

Accordingly, over time, Islamic education in Ilorin evolved from traditional Qur'anic instruction into more organized and formal systems. The introduction of Western education and colonial influence in the 20th century led to reforms and the emergence of modern Madaris that incorporated structured curricula, classrooms, uniforms, attendance registers, and formal administration. Today, many traditional Qur'anic schools have transformed into modern institutions operated by younger and professionally trained Islamic scholars. Ilorin remains one of Nigeria's most important centers of Islamic scholarship, known for promoting peaceful coexistence, multicultural integration, and intellectual development through Islamic education. The

city's strategic geographical position between Northern and Southwestern Nigeria has further strengthened its role as a bridge for cultural exchange, commerce, and the spread of Islamic learning.

Statement of the Problem

Despite the long-standing reputation of Ilorin as a major centre of Islamic scholarship and learning in Nigeria, there is limited comprehensive historical documentation on the development of formal Islamic schools in the city from 1938 to 2023. Although Islamic education has existed in Ilorin for centuries through traditional Qur'anic schools and informal teacher-student learning systems, the transition from these traditional structures to organized formal Islamic schools brought significant changes in curriculum, administration, teaching methods, language of instruction, and school organization. The emergence of Western education, colonial influence, urbanization, and modernization also created new educational challenges and transformations within the Islamic educational system. However, many existing studies focus mainly on the spread of Islam or general Islamic education in Nigeria without adequately examining the historical processes, institutional growth, reforms, and challenges associated with the establishment and expansion of formal Islamic schools specifically in Ilorin.

Furthermore, despite the important role formal Islamic schools have played in preserving Islamic values, promoting literacy, and fostering social integration in Ilorin, there are still concerns regarding inadequate historical records, insufficient scholarly attention, and limited understanding of how these schools evolved over time. Issues such as the adaptation of Islamic schools to modern educational standards, the integration of Western subjects, government regulations, teacher quality, funding, and societal perceptions have continued to influence their development. The year 1938 marked the beginning of formal Islamic education in Ilorin, while 2023 represents a significant period in which formal Islamic schools continued to receive operational recognition through the Kwara State Arabic Education Board. Therefore, this study becomes necessary to critically examine the historical development of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin between 1938 and 2023, with a view to understanding their growth, contributions, transformations, and the challenges that shaped their evolution over the years.

Objectives of the Study

The general purpose of this study is to trace the historical development of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1943 to 2023. Specifically, the study intends to:

- a. trace the major historical antecedents of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin prior to 1938;
- b. identify the objectives of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938-2023;
- c. assess the trends of students' enrollment rate in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938 to 2023; and
- d. examine the availability and adequacy of educational facilities in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin

Research Questions

In order to give direction to this study, the following research questions are raised:

1. What were the major historical antecedents of formalized Islamic schools in Ilorin prior to 1938?
2. What were the objectives of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938 to 2023?
3. What were the trends of student enrollment in the formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938-2023?
4. To what extent were educational facilities in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin available and adequate?

Methodology

This study adopted the historical research method because it focuses on examining and interpreting past events relating to the development of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin between 1938 and 2023 in order to understand present realities and make informed projections about the future. Both primary and secondary sources of data were utilized, including interviews, questionnaires, checklists, proforma, and official documents from the Kwara State Arabic Education Board, textbooks, journals, reports, and articles. The population comprised all 46 formal Islamic schools in Ilorin, while stakeholders from 20 licensed schools formed the target population. Through a multi-stage sampling technique, respondents were grouped into policymakers, implementers, and beneficiaries, from which selected 265 participants were purposively sampled. Data collection instruments included structured interviews and a researcher-designed questionnaire titled "Questionnaire on Historical Development of Formal Islamic School in Ilorin" (QUHIDFISI). The validity and authenticity of the instruments and historical sources were ensured through external and internal criticism by experts. The reliability coefficient of 0.82 was obtained using Cronbach Alpha. Data collected were analyzed using thematic analysis for qualitative information and percentages for quantitative data, with conclusions drawn from the findings.

Results

Table 1: Demographic Profile of the Respondents

Respondents	Frequency	Percentage (%)
Officials from the Arabic education board	5	1.9
Proprietor	20	7.5
Principal	20	7.5
Teachers	100	37.7
Students	100	37.7
Stakeholders	20	7.5
Total	265	100.0

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents. As shown above, 5 (1.9%) of the respondents were from the Arabic education board; 20 (7.5%) were school principals, proprietors and stakeholders, respectively; while 100 (37.7%) of the respondents sampled in the study were teachers and students, respectively. This implies that the majority of the respondents sampled in this study were teachers and students.

Question One: What were the major historical antecedents of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin before 1938?

Table 2: Historical Development of Formal Islamic Schools in Ilorin Before 1938

Theme	Findings	Key Contributions/Implications
Origin of Islamic Education in Ilorin	Islamic education in Ilorin began in the late 18th and early 19th centuries through the influence of Sheikh Alimi and other Islamic scholars.	Ilorin became a notable centre of Islamic learning and scholarship in Nigeria.
Nature of Early Islamic Education	Early Islamic education was informal and conducted mainly in mosques and scholars' residences. Teaching focused on Qur'anic recitation, memorization, Arabic literacy, and basic Islamic teachings.	Helped preserve Islamic faith, culture, and moral values among the people of Ilorin.
Development of Advanced Islamic Learning	Islamic education later expanded beyond Qur'anic memorization to include advanced Islamic sciences such as Fiqh, Hadith, Tafsir, Tawhid, and Arabic grammar.	Produced Islamic scholars, judges, teachers, and community leaders.
Emergence of Formal Islamic Schools	The first recognized formal Islamic school system emerged through the efforts of Sheikh Kamal-deen Al-Adabiy.	Marked the transition from informal Qur'anic schools to organized Islamic institutions.
Establishment of Zumratul Adabiy Schools	Sheikh Kamal-deen Al-Adabiy established the Zumratul Adabiy Group of Schools to provide structured Islamic education alongside Western education.	Introduced a modern model of Islamic schooling in Ilorin.
Integration of Islamic and Western Education	Formal Islamic schools combined Islamic studies with Western subjects such as English language, mathematics, and social studies.	Enabled Muslim students to acquire both religious and secular knowledge.

Factors Responsible for the Establishment of Formal Islamic Schools	The establishment of formal Islamic schools was influenced by the need to preserve Islamic identity, respond to Western education, promote literacy, and improve educational opportunities for Muslims.	Strengthened the position of Islamic education within the modern educational system.
Transformation of Traditional Qur'anic Schools	Traditional Qur'anic schools gradually evolved into organized institutions with classrooms, qualified teachers, timetables, examinations, and certification systems.	Enhanced the quality, structure, and recognition of Islamic education in Ilorin and beyond.
Educational Significance of Ilorin	Ilorin became one of the leading centres of modern Islamic education in Nigeria before 1938.	Contributed significantly to the spread and development of Islamic education in Northern and Southwestern Nigeria.

Question Two: What were the objectives of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938-2023?

Table 3: Objectives of Formal Islamic schools

No.	Items	Mean	S.D	Remarks
1	To instil moral and ethical values such as honesty, discipline and respect in students.	3.86	1.00	Affirmed
2	To integrate Qur'anic education with formal education systems for universal access	3.69	0.99	Affirmed
3	To provide a balanced education that includes spiritual, intellectual, and vocational training.	3.66	0.95	Affirmed
4	To foster national integration and religious tolerance through Islamic teachings.	3.79	0.95	Affirmed
5	To prepare students for civic responsibilities and contributions to society	3.83	0.93	Affirmed

Source: Field Work (2025)

As revealed in Table 3, it was affirmed that the objectives of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin are to instill moral and ethical values such as honesty, discipline and respect in students; prepare students for civic responsibilities and contributions to society; foster national integration and religious tolerance through Islamic teachings; and provide a balanced education that includes spiritual, intellectual and vocational training.

Question Three: What is the trend of students' enrolment in the formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938 to 2023?

Table 3: Enrolment Trends in Formal Islamic Schools in Ilorin from 1938-2023

Academic Session	Male	Rate (%)	Female	Rate (%)	Total	Rate (%)
1938-1947	209	-	129	-	338	-
1948-1957	341	63.16	285	120.93	626	85.21
1958-1967	458	34.31	401	40.70	859	37.22
1968-1977	635	38.65	573	42.89	1208	40.63
1978-1987	897	41.26	621	8.38	1518	25.66
1988-1997	1334	48.72	843	35.75	2177	43.41
1998-2007	2445	83.28	1009	19.69	3454	58.66
2008-2017	4120	68.51	1556	54.21	5676	64.33
2018-2023	7996	94.08	2169	39.40	10165	79.09

As revealed in table 3, the number of male students' enrolment was greater than that of female students in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin from 1938 to 2023. However, between 1938 and 1947, the estimated total number of students enrolled was 338. Also, in 1948-1957, 1958-1967, 1968-1977, 1978-1987 and 1988-1997, formal Islamic schools in Ilorin recorded the estimated total student enrolment of 626, 859, 1,208, 1,518 and 2,177, respectively. In addition, the estimated numbers of 3,454, 5,676 and 10,165 students were enrolled in 1998-2007, 2008-2017 and 2018-2023, respectively, in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin. Therefore, the number of students enrolled in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin increased from 1938 to 2023, but the rate of increment fluctuated as depicted in Figure 1.

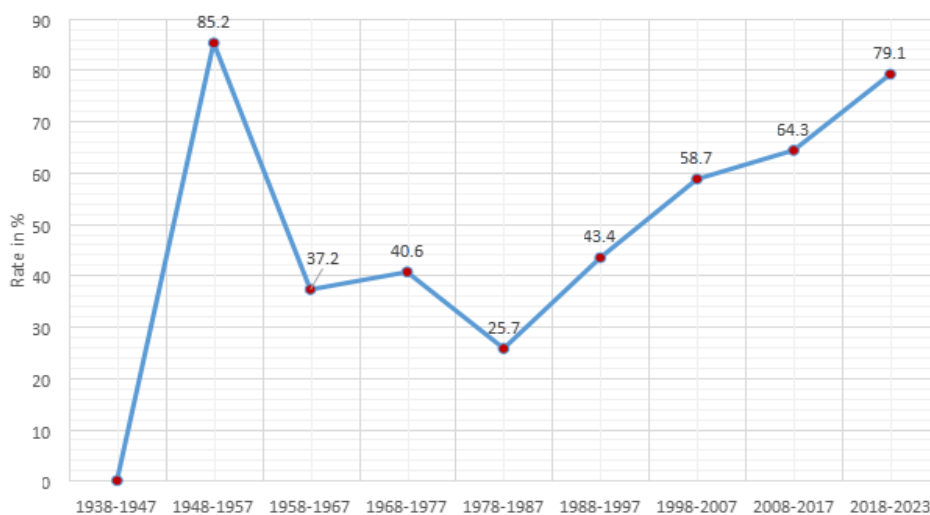


Figure 4: Students' Enrolment Trend in Formal Islamic Schools in Ilorin, Kwara State (1938 - 2023)

As shown in Figure 4, using the 1938-1947 academic session as the starting point, students' enrolment rate significantly increased by 85.2% between the years 1948 and 1957 but increased by 37.2%, 40.6% and 25.7% in 1958-1967, 1968-1977 and 1978-1987, respectively. This *enrolment rate* increased by 43.4%, 58.7%, 64.3% and 79.1% in 1988-1997, 1998-2007, 2008-2017 and 2018-2023, respectively. Hence, the trend of students' enrolment in formal Islamic schools in Ilorin increased from 1938 to 2023, but the rate of increment fluctuated.

Discussion of Findings

The discussion revealed that the historical development of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin originated from a purely traditional system of Islamic education before 1938, where learning took place in mosques, verandas, under trees, and other informal spaces without structured classrooms. Early Islamic education was organized progressively into stages that deepened students' linguistic and religious knowledge, while Islamic scholars played vital roles in preserving and transmitting Islamic culture, values, and teachings across generations. These findings support the views of Abdulrahman (2018) and Adeyemi (2016), who linked the spread of Islamic education with the expansion of Islam and the teaching of the Qur'an and Arabic language. The findings also align with Sakariyau (2019), who described Ilorin as a longstanding centre of Islamic learning in Yorubaland. The emergence of formal Islamic schools was therefore driven by the determination of Islamic scholars to propagate Islam beyond a limited group of learners through organized educational systems.

The study further showed that formal Islamic schools in Ilorin were established to instill moral values, civic responsibility, discipline, honesty, and religious tolerance while preparing students to contribute meaningfully to society. Unlike traditional Islamic schools, formal Islamic schools introduced modern instructional methods, structured assessment systems, certification, and organized school administration. These findings support the assertions of Issa and Jibril (2024), as well as Abubakar and Abdullah (2017), who emphasized the moral and societal roles of Islamic education. The discussion also revealed a steady increase in student enrolment in formal Islamic schools between 1938 and 2023, which may be attributed to the affordability of the schools, cultural and religious trust, and the success of their graduates in different professions. The findings further reinforce the position of Ahmad and Aminu (2017) that Islamic education remains deeply rooted in the history, culture, and traditions of Ilorin.

Conclusion

The study concluded that the transformation of traditional Qur'anic schools into formal Islamic educational institutions was influenced by the efforts of Islamic scholars, the impact of Western education, and the need to modernize Islamic teaching and administration. These schools play important roles in promoting moral values, civic responsibility, religious tolerance, national integration, and increased access to quality faith-based education, as reflected in the steady rise in student enrolment. Despite meeting some basic infrastructural needs, the schools still face shortages of essential academic facilities such as libraries, laboratories, and ICT resources. Funding is largely provided by Muslim communities, Islamic organizations, NGOs, and internal projects, with limited government support. Although the schools have contributed significantly to preserving Islamic heritage and reducing the number of out-of-school children, challenges such as inadequate funding, shortage of qualified teachers, poor curriculum standardization, and insufficient government assistance continue to limit their effectiveness.

Recommendations

Based on the findings of this study, it is recommended that;

1. More Islamic scholars should be committed to the course of Islam and its propagation to develop Islamic schools in the state. Islamic scholars should be more dedicated and ready to take on the challenges of modernization to improve the quality of Islamic education. They should be able to bring and embrace innovations in Islamic education to match the secular one.
2. Formal Islamic schools should continue to uphold their sound moral discipline through Islamic teachings. Since these objectives have shaped the development of the Islamic schools, they should not be watered down by any modernization or otherwise. Maintaining these good virtues will keep the school going and, among so many schools, stand out for the moral and spiritual upbringing of children.
3. Formal Islamic schools should continue to subsidize their cost and make them affordable to increase the patronage of the communities. The increase in enrolment will continue to soar if the school is affordable. This can be done by providing more support for formal Islamic schools locally and internationally.
4. There should be provision of more infrastructural facilities like classrooms, sports facilities, administrative offices, toilets, laboratories, libraries, and ICT centres. This is necessary to expose the students to international standards and to choose a career of their choice.

References

Abdullahi, H. Q. (1997). *Islam in the world: highlights of the History and achievements of Muslims*. South Africa; International Book Services.

- Abdulrahman, Y. M. (2018). Contemporary Islamic education in Nigeria from the rear-view mirror. *American Journal of Educational Research*, 2018, Vol. 6, No. 4, 329-343.
- Abdur-Razzaq M.B. (2019). "Towards sustenance of Islamic culture of Ilorin" in; I.A. Jawondo, A.B. Ambali, A.I. Abdulkabir(ed) (2019). Human security and the survival of Ilorin emirate culture Ilorin. Center for Ilorin Studies, University of Ilorin. Pg 140
- Abubakar, A. (2022). Contributions of Islamic education to the development of Ilorin. (An unpublished master thesis), University of Ilorin, Ilorin, Nigeria.
- Adedeji, L. (2012). Islam, education and development: The Nigeria experience. *British Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, 5(2), 273-282.
- Adeyemi, K. A. (2016). The trend of Arabic and Islamic education in Nigeria: progress and prospects. *Open Journal of Modern Linguistics*, 2016. Retrieved online from <https://www.scirp.org/journal/ojml/>
- Fafunwa, A. B (1974). History of education in Nigeria. London: George Allen and Unwin Ltd.
- Ibrahima, H. & Afeefa, T. (2020). Education in Islamic perspective. Research scholars, department of Education, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, U.P
- Issa, R. A., & Jibril, A. O. (2024). Islamic education in the digital age: The case of formal Islamic schools in Ilorin, Nigeria. *International Journal of Educational Research and Review*, 13(1), 44–61. <https://ejournal.undiksha.ac.id/index.php/IJERR/article/view/67824>
- Javad, H. (2013). A Brief history of Islam (The spread of Islam). Jolfa Branch Islamic University Jolfa, Iran.
- Rahim, A. (1983). Islamic History. Lagos, Nigeria. *Islamic publication bureau*.
- Sakariyau, A. (2019). The Modernization of Islamic education in Ilorin: A study of Arabiyyah and Markaziyah educational systems. Bayero University.
- Sheu, S. (2014). Integrated Qur'anic Education (IQE) in Nigeria: Status and current priorities. Paper presented at a Two-Day Symposium on Integrated Qur'anic Education at Yankari National Park, Organized Jointly by the Bauchi and Sokoto States SUBEB and Northern Education Initiative, 27th-29th, January 2014.
- Sule, K. A. (1997). The Almajiri phenomenon, SAP and population issues in northern Nigeria. A study of Qur'anic school pupils in Sokoto and Talata Mafara. Unpublished.
- Suleiman, M. A. (2010). Foreign aid and Islamic education development in Nigeria. *Journal of Islamic Studies*, 7(1), 23–40
- Suleiman S. A. (2013). The role of Ilorin Muslim scholars to the spread of Islam in Ghana. Published by Centre for Ilorin Studies, university of Ilorin, Ilorin.
-