



## The Role of Student Representative Councils in Curbing Students' Riots in Selected Secondary Schools of Chipata District, Zambia.

Edward Mboyonga\*

Hillside Girls Secondary School, Chipata, Zambia

\*Corresponding Author: Edward Mboyonga, Hillside Girls Secondary School, Chipata, Zambia

**Abstract:** Learning institutions in Zambia have continued to grapple with disciplinary problems such as students' unrest, truancy and alcohol abuse. Informed by Michael Foucault's discourse on discipline and Antonio Gramsci's theory of Hegemony, this research examined the role of Student Representative Councils in mitigating riots in three selected boarding secondary schools in Chipata District. A descriptive case study based on qualitative research design approach was utilised to gain a detailed understanding of complex nature of student voices. Purposive Sampling was used to select head teachers, teachers and student representatives in the study. Data generation was achieved by using a triangulated approach that utilised multiple research tools comprising of interviews, focus group discussion and document review. Thematic analysis was used to develop themes and sub-themes which formed the basis for discussion. The findings revealed that as measures in curbing riots, student councils played various roles ranging from: representational functions, communication purposes, and maintenance of discipline to cultivating a sense of ownership among learners. The study concluded that the involvement of learners in school governance is critical to improving school managerial practices. However, the involvement of student voices in school governance should be modelled along a democratic form of school management, which appreciates the voices of different stakeholders in school, rather than being tokenistic. Recommendations for policy based on findings are suggested.

**Keywords:** Student Representative Council, Riots, School Governance

### 1. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

Learning institutions in Zambia have continued to grapple with disciplinary problems such as students' unrests, truancy and alcohol abuse. In investigating the causes, effects and implications of pupils' riots in high schools, Kumwenda (2010) assert that this violent conduct is not only inimical to society but can also toss the educational machinery out of gear. A major factor that accounts for students' riotous conduct is poor management practices which often exclude students from participating in school governance (MOE, 2014). Consequently, learners show their disapproval of how their school is run through violent class boycotts and strikes. The detrimental effect of such conducts transcends individual schools by cutting across the entire education systems and wider society. It has led to interruption of school calendars, destruction of public properties like school buildings, burning of people's cars, body injuries, and loss of life. It is also of concern, that this anarchic way of airing out grievances is prevalent even in many of the country's higher learning institutions such as the University of Zambia and Copperbelt University. This has negatively affected the quality of educational provision in Zambian public universities whose academic calendars are interrupted regularly as a result of student's riots.

#### 1.1. Statement of the problem

According to the Ministry of Education, "students don't seem to have avenues where they can vent their anger and frustration as they feel left out in matters that affect them by the school administrations" (MOE, 2014, p. 11). Therefore, they have often resorted to unorthodox methods of airing out their grievances by engaging in violent riots and class boycotts. In order to curb student's riotous behaviours, public schools have been compelled to establish Student Representative Councils

(SRCs) to promote learner participation in school governance. In spite of this policy, there is dearth of scholarly literature on the subject. Hence, this study aimed at examining the role of SRCs in mitigating students' riotous conducts in Zambia and in so doing contribute to a scholarly body of knowledge on the subject.

## **1.2. Research Objectives**

The major purpose of this study was to examine the role of SRCs in curbing riots in public secondary schools in Zambia.

## **2. LITERATURE REVIEW**

### **2.1. Understanding Student Councils**

The Ministry of Education defines a student/learner council as “an elected body of learners/student leaders whose day to day mandate is to represent the interests of students according to the dictates of the student’s council constitution” (MOE, 2014, p. 12). They serve as learners’ parliaments where each leader represents a constituency, such as a class or hostel in the case of boarding schools. These student representatives bring out different problems affecting their classes or hostels as well other matters affecting the general welfare of pupils in their schools. The practice of establishing student councils is a shift towards a learner centered leadership approach embedded within the democratic governance of schools. As a management model, the effectual democratic involvement of pupils in governance bodies can be beneficial to individual learners and the entire school community. However, it should not just be emphasised as a model of school management, but also as a means of enabling learners to realise and enjoy their rights.

Several legal frameworks, both at international and national levels, guide Zambia in the promotion, provision and implementation of children’s rights in education. At an international arena, the country is a signatory to the United Nations Conventions on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC). Article 12 of the UNCRC included a provision that introduced a right of all children capable of forming a view to be heard and be taken seriously. It obligates all states parties to “recognise this right and ensure its implementation by listening to the views of the child and according to them due weight” (UNCRC, 2009, p. 8). The obligation further requires that “states parties, with respect to their particular judicial system, either directly guarantee this right, or adopt or revise laws so that this right can be fully enjoyed by the child” (UNCRC, 2009, p. 8). Zambia ratified the CRC in 1991, by virtue of this ratification the country agreed to implement all obligations set out in the CRC. Furthermore, to promote the participation of learners in decision making in schools, the Education Act of 2011 mandates all the learning institutions in Zambia to establish student representative councils (GRZ,2011). The ensuing section will highlight some of the roles played by SRCs in school governance.

### **2.2. The Role of Student Representative Councils in School Governance**

From the literature reviewed it was discovered that the SRCs are significant in appreciating the impact of students’ voice in the life of the school and learners (Daniel, 2015; Chemutai & Chumba, 2014 ; Mwanza, 2013). In studying the factors leading to deviant behaviours among high school pupils in Zambia, Mweemba (2011) recommended that school administrators should allow full participation of pupils that are in school councils in order to enhance behavioural trends among pupils. In this respect, it is vital that learners are given space to effectively participate in the governance of schools so that their voices are heard, and considered in decision making in schools. Such structures provide a basis for consultation with school management, facilitate communication between teachers and pupils, and also serve as a resource for the provision of educational opportunities and community linkages (Keogh & Whyte, 2005). They play a significant role in enhancing the learners’ involvement in decision-making in schools. Additionally, Chemutai & Chumba (2014) opine that they are necessary for representation, mediating conflicts, classwork supervision and monitoring, maintaining discipline and in channeling of student grievances to the school administration for further action. To this effect,

there are suggestions that school authorities should attune to pupils' learning experiences so as to promote commitment towards learning and ownership of their schools (Rudduck & Flutter, 2000).

The establishment of SRCs is also instrumental in promoting student voices and enhancing communication in schools. In enhancing student voices in schools, the SRCs are critical in facilitating and enhancing 'communication', 'consultation', 'debate' and 'dialogue' (Robinson & Taylor, 2007). The four roles are cardinal in ensuring that schools run smoothly as learners are brought on board in matters of school governance. The importance of communicative dialogue is also at the heart of Paulo Freire's *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* in which he underscored the importance of communicative dialogue in empowering people to be involved in decision making on issues affecting their welfare (Freire, 1970). However, this can only be possible when teachers and school managers step out of their traditional banking roles, which has no room for students to voice out on matters affecting their learning or in general school affairs. As such, if well utilised by school managers, student councils can lead to improved flow of information in their schools and reduce tensions which might result into student unrests.

Literature is replete with evidence that in schools where the value of student voice is appreciated in governance, there has been increased communication, improved discipline, and a sense of organisation and responsibility among learners (Chemutai & Chumba, 2014; Fletcher, 2003). Conversely, in the absence of such forums, some schools have experienced violent behaviours, truancy, destruction of school property and other heinous crimes (Miller, 1998). As alluded to earlier, several students' riots have occurred in secondary schools in Zambia due to the lack of forums for student involvement in school governance and airing out grievances. This view is in congruent with suggestions that "riots and demonstrations in secondary schools can be seen as collective escape valves for a collective frustration and especially when the school is the source of that frustration" (Kibui, Kibera, & Bradshaw, 2014, p. 1). Hence, appreciating students' voice is critical in raising turbulence levels and clearing misunderstandings (Mitra & Gross, 2009), thereby leading to peaceful atmospheres in schools.

### **3. THEORETICAL FRAME WORK**

The study draws on Michael Foucault's discourse on discipline and the Theory of Hegemony advanced by Antonio Gramsci. These theories are significant in informing us, how the involvement of learners in school governance serves as systems of social control in maintaining discipline among students by school authorities.

#### **3.1. Michael Foucault's Discourse on Discipline**

Michael Foucault discourse on discipline builds on Jeremy Bentham ideology of the panopticon. The panopticon was a circular building with an observation tower in the centre of an open space surrounded by an outer wall which made surveillance more effective. This constant surveillance acted as a system of social control for maintaining people in a disciplinary situation. As espoused by Gallagher (2010, p. 262), "schools are often understood by social researchers as panoptic spaces, where power is exercised through constant surveillance and monitoring". For this reason, Foucault's panopticism can be compared with present forms of school governance structures vis-à-vis student councils and prefectural bodies which aim at regulating student behaviour via a panoptic view as they act as the "eyes of the school administration". In ensuring discipline in schools, the SRCs may have a panoptical effect on the learners as they act as surveillance mechanisms on behalf of the school administration to bring pupils more close to the school. Where such monitoring structures exist, Foucault (1975) points out that a state of consciousness and permanent visibility is ensured among those under surveillance [pupils] and power automatically functions. In such circumstances Fielding (2001, p. 103) illustrates that "the 'why' of listening has more to do with personal survival, an astute response to an additional means of surveillance, than it has to do with recognition of student insight or the possibility of mutual learning". Furthermore, in showing the relevance of Foucault's ideas to student voices, Devine (2004, p. 119) states that the "systems of surveillance permeate school practice so that children themselves constantly monitor their behaviour in light of school norms". In this

regard, the idea of running a student council can serve as an early warning mechanism to school authorities where students face much discontentment.

### **3.2. Theory of Hegemony- Antonio Gramsci**

The practices by school management can also be analysed within the lenses of Antonio Gramsci's (1971) theory of hegemony in which the ruling class exert power in society through consent. According to Gramsci (1971) cited in (Tooms, Lugg, & Bogotch, 2010, p. 107), "hegemony is a socio-political concept that explains how certain groups of people in society are constrained, oppressed, and subjugated by other groups of people without the use of violence and through the creation of cultural metamessages". The relevance of his theory to learner participation in school governance lies in the fact that Gramsci attempted to distinguish between coercion and consent as alternative mechanisms of social power (Stoddart, 2007). In this respect, school councils are absorbed into the dominant structures of the school management and efficiently become much less of a political problem. Therefore, the hegemonic power succeeds in making pupils subscribe to the social values and norms prescribed by school authorities. In this way the school authorities are able to stamp their authority and ensure discipline not by force but through practices that maintains a balance between coercion and consent where students are monitored in different school management committees where they are on board. However, due to power contestation that arise when students are allowed to take part in school governance, their participation is often dominated and manipulated by those in authority, i.e. teachers and head teachers to maintain their hegemony. Therefore, this domination has to be constantly worked out, by the power holders. In this regard, the domination is constantly worked out through manipulation which is instrumental in maintaining dominance for those in authority (Freire, 1970). To achieve this, Stoddart (2007) highlights that the dominant structures extend their power through means of voluntarism and participation as opposed to the threat of punishment for disobedience and in so doing there is the perpetuation of inequitable power. Against this background, it suffices to argue that in as much as SRCs provide an opportunity for the students to have a voice in their schools, they also serve as managerial practices through which school authorities maintain their hegemony over students and ultimately manage school affairs smoothly.

## **4. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

### **4.1. Methodology**

The study adopted a descriptive case study in view of the research aims and in cognisance of the theoretical and methodological approaches of previous research. The approach was utilised to gain a detailed understanding of the complex nature of student voices. Purposive sampling was used to select the three secondary boarding schools, three head teachers, teachers and student representatives in the study. Data generation was achieved through a triangulated approach that utilised multiple research tools comprising of interviews, focus group discussion and document review. The researcher conducted a total of fifteen in-depth face to face interviews with Head teachers, student council liaison teachers and class teachers while three focus group discussions with pupil representatives were conducted. The data were analysed using thematic analysis.

### **4.2. Ethical Considerations**

The research took into account special ethical consideration as required by the *Code of Ethics Policy* for the University of Dublin, Trinity College, which calls for respect and protection of the interests and concerns of participants. Apart from that, permission was granted to undertake field research in Zambia, by the Ministry of General Education through the office of the District Education Board Secretary (DEBS) in Chipata District of Eastern Province. The data generated during the study were treated with the utmost privacy and anonymity, and no information about the schools or the participants will be identified in the research.

## **5. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION ON THE ROLE OF SRCs IN CURBING STUDENTS' RIOTS**

### **5.1. Representational Roles**

One of the major causes of students' strikes has been the lack of avenues for learners to express their views and grievances to school authorities. From the data generated, it was evident that the selected schools had put in place forums for the involvement of students in the decision-making process. The forums identified were school boards, prefectural bodies, student representative councils, assemblies

and various school working committees. The SRCs were comprised of prefects, class monitors and monitresses. Conspicuously, there were no student representatives on academic and financial committees at all the three schools. The lack of student representation led to suspicions on how the school user fees were spent, as students complained of poor diets despite making payments. The main argument put forward by head teachers for the exclusion of student's voice in executing financial matters in schools was that they were immature; hence parents best handled such intrinsic affairs through the Parents Teachers Associations (PTA) executive committees. This finding is not peculiar to Zambian schools only, similar findings have been identified in Kenya (Chemutai & Chumba, 2014) and South Africa (Mncube & Naidoo, 2014) where they have been limited involvement of learners in matters of school finances.

### **5.2. Communication Channel**

The study revealed that to a greater extent, student councils played a significant role in improving communication in the schools, as they served as an important information bridge between the learners and school management. According to the three head teachers interviewed, the lack of communication creates suspicion which would trigger student unrest in the form of riots. These sentiments were also shared by class teachers and student representatives. Thus, there was a consensus that the student councils were useful conduits of information in schools which reduced information gap. The student participants argued that they still had the opportunity to voice out on issues affecting their welfare in classes, dormitories and the dining. In this way SRCs played a significant role in advocating for student welfare through dialogue. Correspondingly, literature shows that student participation provides a platform for consultation and is a source of information and can be a valuable resource for effective school management (Keogh & Whyte, 2005). Furthermore, this provided them with an avenue for in channelling grievances which made it possible for effective conflict resolution. The correlation between student involvement and reduction of conflicts in the school community is also evidenced in some other studies (Damiani, 2016; Chemutai & Chumba, 2014).

### **5.3. School Management is More Alert to the Needs of Students**

According to the research findings, the underlying factor for the sensitivity and alertness on the part of the head teachers emanated from the realisation that SRCs served as important platforms for sharing a range of challenges encountered in schools. They acted as “the eyes of the school administration” because students provided feedback to head teachers on affairs affecting them, e.g. teacher absenteeism, the conduct of prefects and quality of food served in the dining among other issues. The feedback from student council meetings influenced head teachers on how they made some school decisions. Since council forums were a key source of communication, the respondents and especially the school head teachers, pointed out that there was an improvement in the flow of communication. The constant flow of information through council meetings also led to more cordial relationships between the learners and school administration, thereby reducing the chances of student riots. This is in line with Damiani's (2016) findings that head teachers who actively interact with students are better at structuring students' experiences in their schools.

### **5.4. Improving Levels of Discipline in Schools**

The findings illustrated that one of the major roles associated with student councils was the maintenance of discipline by enhancing good behaviour and also promoting a sense of ownership among students. Similarly, some of the literature reviewed indicated that student councils are vital in building positive school climates by encouraging students' positive behaviour (Taylor & Johnson, 2002), necessitating a strong sense of ownership and in maintaining discipline (Daniel, 2015). The two senior prefects at School C were involved in the making of school rules and as such represented the interests of their fellow students in the process. Student representatives initiated a campaign against vandalism of school property and graffiti.

The significance of student's voice in regulating behaviour and ensuring school discipline has been emphasised in various studies (Miller, 1998; Devine, 2004; Chemutai & Chumba, 2014). Also, the importance of monitoring mechanism structures in ensuring adherence to prescribed behaviour has been underscored in Foucault's (1975) discourse on discipline. Across all the three schools the panoptic effect of student councils in promoting conformity to school rules was apparent. Members of

the councils were either class monitors/monitresses or prefects who were responsible for maintaining order and ensuring discipline among their fellow students. Furthermore, seen from Gramsci's hegemonic perspective, they are a form of coercion in which pupils consent to the terms and conditions set up the school authorities who are the custodians of power, and through which students generally subscribe to school values and norms. Thus, in executing their roles, student representatives acted as 'eyes' of the school administration through which the general student behaviour was constantly monitored.

### **5.5. Student Empowerment and Instilling Sense of Ownership**

Regarding empowerment, the findings indicate that at school level the students were empowered to make a difference and at a personal level they acquired personal skills. In all three research sites, the student participants considered themselves to be important stakeholders in the life of the school. For instance, at School A, they advocated for the refurbishment of the boy's toilets and the school administration listened to their plight by purchasing new urinals, while at School B the timetable for preparatory studies was adjusted to enable students to go to bed early. Equally, at School C, security was boosted by putting up a wire fence around the hostels even though students initially had wanted a wall fence built. From these examples, it is clear that students had developed a sense of empowerment and a culture of 'wee' feeling (Daniel, 2015), which leads to the positive experience of their school lives.

### **5.6. Challenges Faced by Student Representative Councils**

In spite of the recognition of SRCs as an important measure in mitigating student riotous behaviours, the study identified a myriad of factors that hindered the involvement of students in participating in school governance. The major challenges affecting the efficacy of student councils were: bureaucracy; adult domination; tokenism, teacher opposition, lack of feedback and training, and irregular meetings owing to the busy academic calendar.

## **6. CONCLUSIONS**

This paper presented the findings and discussions on the role played by the SRCs in curbing students' riots in selected secondary schools in Zambia. It is evident that the involvement of learners in school governance is critical to improving school managerial practices and in creating favourable learning environments. However, their involvement should go beyond tokenism and surface compliance. Indeed, stakeholder involvement in school management is an important approach towards a more participative and democratic leadership which is most suited for the 21st Century schools. As such Head teachers must embrace democratic values of school management, which appreciates the voices of learners as important stakeholders in schools considering the fact that the primary activities of schools are centred on the lives of the learners.

## **7. RECOMMENDATION FOR POLICY**

- The Ministry should develop training and awareness programmes for all stakeholders including head teachers, deputy head teachers, guidance teachers, class teachers and students on the value of student's voice in school governance.
- The Ministry should ensure meaningful decentralisation that will transform decision-making in schools from horizontal based approach to a more vertical approach that will facilitate the involvement of students.

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

The author wishes to acknowledge the guidance of Prof. Andrew Loxley in the School of Education at University of Dublin, Trinity College. Loxley was instrumental in supervising the thesis which provided a foundation for this article. Mr. John Zimba, a teacher at Anoya Zulu Secondary School is also acknowledged for his comments on the earlier drafts of this article.

## **REFERENCES**

- [1] Chemutai, L., & Chumba, S. (2014). Student Councils Participation in Decision Making in Public Secondary Schools in Kericho West Sub County, Kenya,,,. *International Journal of Advanced Research*, 2(6), 850–858.

- [2] Damiani, J. (2016). Unlocking students' perspectives of school leadership: toward a theory of engaging students in school leadership. *International Journal of Student Voice*, 1(1). Retrieved from <https://ijsv.psu.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/10/Damiani-2016-.pdf>
- [3] Daniel, O. A. (2015). Role of students' representative council in fighting against students' indiscipline in the second cycle institutions in Kumasi metropolitan directorate of education. *African Journal of Education and Human Development* ISSN: 2518-0304, 1(1).
- [4] Devine, D. (2004). School Matters: Listening to what children have to say. In J. Deegan, D. Devine, & A. Lodge (Eds.), *Primary Voices: Equality, Diversity and Childhood in Irish Primary Schools*. Dublin: Institute of Public Administration.
- [5] Fielding, M. (2001). Beyond the rhetoric of student voice: New departures or new constraints in the transformation of 21st century schooling? *FORUM*, 43(2), 100–110.
- [6] Foucault, M. (1975). *Discipline and Punishment: The Birth of the Prison*. New York: Vintage.
- [7] Freire, P. (1970). *Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. New York: Continuum Publishing.
- [8] Gallagher, M. (2010). Are Schools Panoptic? *Surveillance & Society*, 7(3/4), 262–272.
- [9] Government of the Republic of Zambia. (2011). *Education Act, 2011*. Lusaka: Government Printers.
- [10] Keogh, A. F., & Whyte, J. (2005). *Second Level Student Councils in Ireland: A study of enablers, barriers and supports*. Dublin: National Children's Office Dublin.
- [11] Kibui, A., Kibera, L., & Bradshaw, G. (2014). Conflict Management as a Tool for Restoring Discipline in Kenyan Public Secondary Schools. *International Journal of Scientific Research and Innovative Technology*, 1(3), 1–10.
- [12] Kumwenda, G. E. (2010). *Pupils' riots in selected high schools: Their Causes, Effects and Implications*. (M.Ed Thesis). University of Zambia, Lusaka.
- [13] Miller, D. (1998). *Enhancing Adolescent Competence: Strategies for Classroom Management*. Belmont: Wadsworth Publishing Company.
- [14] Ministry of Education. (2014). *Guidelines on the Administration and Management of Guidance and Counseling in the Education System*. Lusaka: Directorate of Teacher Education and Specialised Services.
- [15] Mitra, D. ., & Gross, S. J. (2009). Increasing student voice in high school reform: Building partnerships, improving outcomes. *Educational Management Administration & Leadership*, 37(4), 522–543.
- [16] Mncube, V., & Naidoo, R. (2014). The Contribution of School Governing Bodies in Promoting Democracy in South African Schools: The Current Trends. *Mediterranean Journal of Social Sciences*, 5(3), 484–492.
- [17] Mwanza, T., S. (2013). *Characteristics of Schools with Frequent Student Behaviour Problems*. Berlin: Lambert Academic Publishing.
- [18] Mweemba, G. (2011). *Factors leading to deviant behaviours among pupils in selected high schools of Kabwe Districts* (M.Ed Thesis). University of Zambia, Lusaka.
- [19] Robinson, C., & Taylor, C. (2007). Theorizing student voice: Values and perspectives. *Improving Schools*, 10(1), 5–17.
- [20] Rudduck, J., & Flutter, J. (2000). Pupil participation and pupil perspective: 'carving a new order of experience'. *Cambridge Journal of Education*, 30(1), 75–89.
- [21] Stoddart, M. C. (2007). Ideology, hegemony, discourse: A critical review of theories of knowledge and power. *Social Thought & Research*, 191–225.
- [22] Taylor, M. J., & Johnson, R. (2002). *School councils: Their role in citizenship and personal and social education*. Berkshire: National Foundation for Educational Research.
- [23] Tooms, A. K., Lugg, C. A., & Bogotch, I. (2010). Rethinking the politics of fit and educational leadership. *Educational Administration Quarterly*, 46(1), 96–131.
- [24] UNCR. (2009). General Comment No.12 (2009). The right of the child to be heard. In Committee on the rights of the child. Geneva: UNICEF-Committee on the rights of the child.

#### **AUTHOR'S BIOGRAPHY**



**Edward Mboyonga** teaches History and Civic Education at Hillside Girls Secondary School in Chipata, Zambia. He holds a B.A Ed (History) with merit from the University of Zambia and an M.Ed (Foundation Studies) from the University of Dublin, Trinity College where he graduated with Distinction. He is currently finalising his thesis for the MA in Peace and Conflict Studies at the Copperbelt University, Zambia. His research interests include but not confined to: African

history and politics, sociology of education, higher education, education and social policy, human rights, governance and peace building.

**Citation:** Edward Mboyonga. "Role of Student Representative Councils in Curbing Students' Riots in Selected Secondary Schools of Chipata District, Zambia". *International Journal of Humanities Social Sciences and Education (IJHSSE)*, vol 5, no. 3, 2018, pp. 36-43 doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.20431/2349-0381.0503004>.

**Copyright:** © 2018 Authors. This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution License, which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.