

MALAWI

Students' Participation in Discipline Issues among Students in Secondary Schools: A Case of Malosa and Mulunguzi Secondary Schools

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1. Frame of Reference

Malawi is a signatory of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC) in which Article 28 recognizes the child's right to education. In order to achieve this, in 1994 Malawi introduced free, but not compulsory, primary education-plans are underway to make it compulsory, though. In addition, it has public secondary schools which accommodate students at the national, district and community levels. Besides these public secondary schools, Malawi is encouraging secondary education through private and open secondary schools for those who do not have access to public secondary education.

Despite the government's efforts to have the child access education, indiscipline of students in schools is one factor that hinders the child from accessing quality education and successfully completing his or her studies. The indiscipline is a hindrance in a number of ways.

Firstly, it reduces teacher- student contact time in the sense that teachers, sometimes, use learning hours to settle discipline cases, which may take a day or two if the case requires investigation and hearing as stipulated in the guidelines on discipline (Ministry of Education, Science and Technology, 2001).

Secondly, the learning process is interrupted because sometimes internal punishments are administered to the culprits during class time while their friends are learning. If a more serious offence is committed, students may be suspended from school. This means that they stay at home for one to six weeks and when they come back their friends are

far ahead. If more serious offences are committed, the students get expelled from school and some choose to drop out on their own due to the unfriendly environment created at the school because of the punishments given.

This scenario is a challenge towards achievement of the Education for All by 2015 goal as well as a hindrance to exercise of the right to education.

2. Purpose

The purpose of this project is to enable students to take an active role in issues of discipline among fellow students in their school.

2.1. Expected Outcome

- Increased opportunity for students to freely express their views on issues that concern them in the school so that at the end of the day they do not get involved in indiscipline
- Increased level of cooperation and trust between administration, staff and students
- Increased student school attendance and teacher- student contact time leading to improved academic performance and completion rate

2.2 Target Group

The target group in this project was students of Mulunguzi Secondary School and Malosa Secondary School in Zomba District. The two schools have more similarities than differences. Malosa is located in a rural area while Mulunguzi is located in an urban area. However, students selected to Mulunguzi come from rural areas within Zomba while those of Malosa come from several districts in Malawi. They are both mixed boarding secondary schools which means both boys and girls are accommodated at the schools when schools are in session. They both enroll students of grades 9 to 12 commonly referred to as forms 1 to 4. The majority are in the age range of 14-17 years although some are over aged- up to 25 years. Entrance into the schools is through selection based on merit and students pay school fees. The enrolment capacity for both schools is 480 students per school year but the enrolment during the project was 732 at Malosa and 719 at Mulunguzi.

2.3 Stakeholders

The stakeholders included head teachers, teachers, members of support staff, Parents' Teacher Association (PTA) Executive and Education Board.

3. Activities

3.1 Briefing sessions after coming back from Sweden

The team briefed the Education Division Manager about the CRC training as well as the project and sought permission to go to Malosa and Mulunguzi Secondary Schools to carry out the project. The Manager was very supportive and granted the permission.

The team went further to brief the District Education Managers for Zomba Urban and Rural who were also quite supportive of the project.

Later, on two different days, the team sensitised the Head teacher and staff members of Malosa Secondary School and the Head teacher and teachers of Mulunguzi Secondary School about CRC and the project.

In the two schools there were some observations concerning the project. The staff members asked questions like how and why Malosa and Mulunguzi were sampled. In response, the team said they chose the schools due to proximity, since the project was not funded, as well as the frequent occurrence of indiscipline cases in the schools, as seen from the frequent reports on indiscipline cases submitted to the Division Office. The team further said that it was because they were familiar with the two schools.

There was another question on why the team chose only boarding and co-education schools and not also a day or single sex school for better comparison since indiscipline cases were dependent on the type of school. However, the teams' focus was not on comparison of the cases but their occurrence, different or not, and students' involvement in the issues of discipline in the schools.

Other stakeholders like the Education Board and PTA Executive representatives were also briefed.

3.2 Baseline study

The team conducted a baseline study of the indiscipline cases in the 2010/2011 academic year. This was done in order to appreciate the type and extent of indiscipline cases occurring at the two schools.

The following were the results at Malosa:

Cases	Frequency	No. of Students involved
Possessing cell phones	35	35
Going out of school bounds	11	17
Defiance of authority	9	18
Persistent truancy	8	8
Use of obscene/abusive language	7	9
Absence overnight without permission	6	6
Theft	6	6
Teasing and bullying	4	19
Boy/ girl relationships	3	26
Pregnancy	3	4
Forgery of name	2	2
Fighting	2	4
Beer drinking	1	9
Instigating and taking part in rebellious behaviour	1	18
TOTAL	67	183

Other Cases

Absconding classes and studies, making noise during class and study time, reporting late for school activities, quarrelling with other students and refusing to work in hostels.

Punishment

Expulsion (24), suspension (49), rustication (21), internal punishment (several) and counselling (several)

The following were the results at Mulunguzi:

Offence	Frequency	No of Offenders	Punishment
Going out of school bounds without permission	18	33	2 weeks rustication, when repeated suspension
Absconding classes and exams	5	19	2 weeks rustication
Open defiance of authority	5	8	4 weeks suspension
Vandalising electricity in hostels	3	6	2 weeks rustication
Theft	2	3	suspension
Attempting to steal	1	1	
Spending a night outside school without permission	3	3	suspension
Entertaining outsiders within the school	3	3	1 week rustication
Being found drunk (repeated)	1	1	6 weeks suspension
Fighting	1	1	4 weeks suspension
Cooking in hostel	1	1	2 weeks rustication
Forging signature in library	1	1	3 weeks suspension
TOTAL	44	80	

Students involved in both schools

More boys than girls were involved in the indiscipline cases, especially form 3 and form 4 students (both new comers and those who were enrolled at form 1).

3.3 Briefing on Baseline Study

The team briefed the head teachers and teachers of both schools on the results of the baseline study.

The team also met the students of Malosa and Mulunguzi and briefed them on the results of the baseline study. They talked to them about their right to education, how it is affected by the frequent occurrence of the indiscipline cases and the fact that they can play a great role in the discipline issues of the school.



Rose Kamwachale addressing students on issues of their behaviour and education

At each school, the students were divided into groups, according to their classes in order to discuss what causes their involvement in the cases and what could be done to reduce the occurrence. Each group was led by at least a prefect and a class monitor/leader.



A group of students discussing issues of their discipline during a weekend

The causes of students' indiscipline from the two schools were almost similar and have been grouped under the following themes:

- **Lack of or inadequate provision of important resources and facilities to students** e.g food, telephone, medication etc
- **Strict school rules** eg no outing days.
- **Failure of teachers to act as role models** eg some teachers using bad language to students and dressing poorly.
- **Poor student -teacher relationship** eg some teachers are not friendly when teaching and sometimes students are not listened to when they make requests or suggestions.
- **Over-enrolment**
- **Students' oriented** eg no respect and love for one another; having bad habits like rudeness and being thieves; carelessness with their belongings; adolescence; peer pressure; not following school rules.

NB. The students also suggested some solutions to these causes which were brought to the attention of the administrators for consideration.

3.4 Focus Group Discussions and Interviews

Seeing that most of what was collected from the students focused more on the administration and staff than the students themselves the team decided to conduct focus group discussions and interviews in order to collect more information on causes of indiscipline in the schools; hence, interviews and focus group discussions were held with the Head teachers and Discipline Committees which comprised, 3 Heads of Department, 3 Boarding staff and 3 Form Teachers. The team also held interviews with the kitchen staff and watchmen.

The causes they cited have been summarised below:

In relation to students

- Lack of ambition/vision- students do not really know why they are at school
- Misinterpretation of human rights without considering their responsibilities
- Peer pressure
- Lack of self-acceptance- students from poor or broken families do not accept their condition

In relation to authorities

- Inadequate guidance and counselling by teachers and parents

- Poor management and allocation of resources
- Inconsistence in handling students' indiscipline cases
- Lack of communication between authorities and students eg when there's change of menu in most cases there is no timely communication to students
- Admission policy – students who join the schools from other schools bring in conflicting culture corrupting the good culture at the school
- Poor choice of student leaders

3.5 Sensitisation on CRC

Having understood the situation on the ground in relation to students' discipline at both schools, the team decided to conduct sensitisation meetings on CRC. This sensitisation targeted our target group as well as the stakeholders. The content of the sensitisation meeting included: reflection on the student, 3 pillars of CRC, Article 12: the right to be heard and participation. (For details of the content, refer to the Appendix.)

After the presentation, the team gave the stakeholders an opportunity to express their fears if they are to give students the opportunity to participate in issues which concern them. They cited the following:

- Students may think that they are at par with teachers once given room to express their views or suggest solutions.
- It is time wasting.
- Inferiority complex-teachers and administrators thinking that their value may be undermined.
- Students cannot participate in everything- some issues are too complex for them.
- Students may be too demanding.

3.6 Seeking views through interviews and focus group discussions on how students can participate in discipline issues

The team gathered this information from teachers, students, Support staff, PTA Representatives and Education Board Representatives

- Students should be involved in formulating school and class rules.
- Prefects Council should be frequently involved in giving fellow students sensitisation talks on school rules.
- Students should work hand in hand with their leaders in identifying and reporting indiscipline cases to school authorities and they should be honest in their reports as well as during investigation.

- They should be responsible by following school rules and regulations to reduce occurrence of indiscipline and avoid punishment.
- Students should be free to express their grievances and concerns to school authorities, through their representatives, on how the school is being run and that should not be taken as defiance of authority
- Student leaders should meet frequently to assess progress and make follow up on complaints from students.
- School Administration should hold regular meetings with prefects and class leaders in order to gather information on what is happening on compass and communicate important information.
- Students should be visionary enough to know why they are at school and concentrate more on their studies than other useless things.
- They should take part in entertainment and sporting activities during their free time in order to keep busy and avoid indiscipline
- Students should be God fearing and belong to religious societies and congregations because they encourage them to be disciplined.
- Students should be involved in electing their leaders, who should know that they have been trusted with responsibility and be exemplary by obeying school rules and being impartial.
- Students should advise and control one another when one wants to misbehave or has already misbehaved.
- Indiscipline cases should first be discussed by student leaders because some cases are not worth teachers' attention.
- Role models in different groupings e.g. same class should be able to give talks on areas in which they are excelling, for instance in academic performance, good behaviour etc.
- A club should be established whereby selected students can be trained to identify, befriend and counsel fellow students who have behaviour problems.
- Schools should introduce suggestion boxes in which students can place any suggestions or complaints they have and school authorities should take these seriously.

NB: These views were presented to the schools for consideration.

3.7 Formation of Student Councils

From the discussion on causes and possible solutions to indiscipline, the team observed that the students have a lot to say concerning their day to day lives at school. Again, from the interviews and focus group discussions the team learnt that there are meetings held with school administration through which they can air out their concerns but

there still seems to be some limitation in participation and representation. Because of this, the team decided to facilitate the formation of Student Councils.

In the two schools, there already exist the Prefects' Council but there is limited participation and representation since students come from just one form. Again, class monitors or leaders are also already in place but their roles to participate and represent are limited. In addition, there seems to be no point where these two groups meet as leaders in order to discuss and communicate issue of concern among the students.

Therefore, after lengthy discussions with members of staff a consensus was reached that the council should comprise the already existing structure of prefects and monitors. The monitors were to initiate meetings at classroom level, at least once a fortnight and assess their stay during the two weeks, looking at positives and negatives. After which, they would get in touch with either their class teachers or members of Prefects' Council depending on the issues to be communicated. Later, there would be meetings with the authorities.

4. Results

Through this project, students had the opportunity to reflect on the indiscipline taking place in their school. They analysed the causes, according to their day to day experiences, and suggested what they thought was the best way to deal with those causes. The findings were presented to teachers and administrators for possible action.

Of course there were mixed reactions. On one hand, some of the stakeholders thought the students were not being realistic since it was like they were putting more blame on teachers and administrators than themselves for their indiscipline and they were making 'unrealistic' demands. On the other hand, some were positive and according to one authority, "The causes and solutions that the students aired out are an eye opener."

Some consideration was made in the schools on the views of the students. For instance, students cited theft in the hostels being due to the hostels not being locked and suggested that they should be locked during class and study time and the boys' dispensary, where boys can rest when sick, should be functional. This was implemented. The students also complained about poor dressing of teachers, and the teachers concerned at some point were talked to by the Head teacher of one of the schools.

The focus of the project being participation, there is a noticeable will among administrators to involve and consult the students, through their leaders, which has resulted in increased participation of students. For example, the Head teacher of one of the target

schools, seeing that the money allocated to food on the budget was inadequate and fearing the students' possible negative reaction, he had to involve the student leaders in coming up with the menu. The student leaders struggled to come up with the menu and the same were used by the Head teacher to communicate to fellow students the difficulties that the school was going through financially.

Another example is a case where there was a need to promote speaking of English among students at one target school. The staff concerned had to involve Prefects' Council and Class Monitors (Students' Council in this context) by sharing the vision with them and asking them to share it with their schoolmates, which the Council did and it worked.

As a result of the CRC sensitisation, there is awareness of the three pillars of CRC in the schools, that is, provision, protection and participation.

5. Discussion and Reflection

The concept of participation, according to CRC, seems to be new and a bit contrary to the traditional way of raising children in the Malawian culture. The elderly ones usually take a bigger responsibility in making decisions for children and children question little of what the elders do. The teachers and students in the target schools have grown in such a culture and so coming to a point where participation is viewed and fully appreciated from the CRC point of view may need a lot more time. The students were very excited with the idea of participation in issues that concern them in the school. However, there is fear that if the concept is not well understood it may be misinterpreted and make students behave irresponsibly. This could be seen from the fears the teachers expressed after the CRC presentation. The students, therefore, need close monitoring and guidance.

Again, as the students are given the opportunity to express themselves, there is need for the administrators to take the contributions and criticisms from the students with a positive mind even though it is not everything the students say that should be taken. This will reduce the students' aggressive behaviour.

The team managed to conduct the activities successfully and get the results because of support from the authorities and stakeholders. The Education Division Manager gave the permission to carry out the project in two of his schools, Malosa and Mulunguzi. The District Education Manager's Office also supported the team by providing printing and photocopying services.

The Head teachers in the two schools were willing to give permission and arrange for the team to meet teachers and students. Again, there was willingness of the students and different stakeholders to participate in the activities of the project at various stages.

6. Way Forward

- There is need for the team to continue working hand in hand with the schools in monitoring the operation of the student council up to a point where the schools can own the project.
- Some of the information collected from the target group and stakeholders on how students can participate in discipline issues needs implementation in the schools.

7. References

- Landsdown G. (2000) 'The Participation of Children' in Changing Childhoods pp273-282: Milton Keynes: The Open University
- Ministry of Education, Science and Technology (2001). Discipline Policy Guidelines
- Hodgkin R & Newell P.(2007) Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child, fully Revised third edition. Geneva: United Nations Publications

8. Appendix

CONTENT OF THE CRC SENSITISATION MEETING

1. REFLECTION ON THE STUDENT

- Description without concept of age
 - Playful
 - Dependent
 - Talkative
 - Irresponsible
 - Needs guidance
 - Developing

- Experiencing adolescence etc.
- **Everyday experiences from waking up to bed time**
 - **People he/she meets:**
 - Peers, Boarding Masters/ Mistress,
 - Teachers, Business people, Support Staff etc.
 - **Joyful/Happy moments**
 - When performs well in class
 - During meal times especially when appetising
 - During blackouts
 - When on trips
 - During entertainment
 - When receives parcel/ money/visitors etc.
 - **Sad moments**
 - When has failed in class
 - When sick
 - When involved in indiscipline and case is under interrogation
 - During exams
 - When without pocket money
 - When rebuffed
 - When personal items get stolen
 - When the kitchen runs out of food before getting his/her share

NB: These experiences and encounter affect the child's everyday behaviour.

2. UNCRC

- Adopted on 20th Nov, 1989
- Malawi is a signatory
- Based on 3 pillars
 - **provision** (right to education, food, clothes, shelter, health services etc)
 - **protection** (right to life, protection from abuse, harmful punishment etc)
 - **participation** (right to religion, to play, to form and join societies, to be heard etc.)

NB: For students the emphasis was on their responsibilities in relation to rights.

Article 12: The Right to be Heard

States parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child. *(Implementation Handbook for the Convention on the Rights of the Child 2007:149)*

Interpretation

Children can have views on different issues, therefore adults, (i.e. Head teachers, teachers, Boarding Masters etc) should give children room to express those views in all decisions and actions that concern them. The views should be taken seriously – of course not everything taken but consideration should be given depending on children's level of understanding of the issues involved.

3. PARTICIPATION

Participation means children taking part in and influencing processes, decisions and activities that affect them, in order to achieve greater respect for their rights. (Landsdown 2000:273)

This does not imply that:

- Children have the same status as adults
- Adults no longer have responsibilities towards children

It implies:

Adults working closely with children for the betterment of children's lives.

It requires a major shift in thinking – adults recognising children as competent social actors – since traditionally children are subordinate to adults.

It also requires shift of power and responsibility from adults to children – not over or against adults but sharing it with adults

NB: Recognising children as social actors and allowing them to participate fully in issues that affect them is the best way to enforce and implement children's rights.

Children are more competent than we, adults, usually think.

(Some) Children have good ideas about their problems, needs and possible solutions; hence the need to involve them.

What participation is about:

- Children being treated with dignity and respect e.g. in class, at dining hall etc.
- Children being listened to and their voices being heard
- Children being consulted on matters that affect them

- Children being given adequate information to be able to form an opinion
- Children making choices and influencing decisions contributing to the understanding and solution of social problems.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. Why are students getting involved in these indiscipline cases?
2. Apart from suspension, rustication and internal punishment, how else are indiscipline cases handled?
3. What are you doing in order to prevent occurrence of indiscipline cases among students?
- 4 a. Do students have the opportunity to meet management and air out their concerns?
 - b. If yes how often?
 - c. How effective are the meetings?
5. Any suggestions on how to prevent indiscipline cases?