

## ZAMBIA

### Raising Awareness among Pupils, Teachers and Parents on the Rights of Children through School and Class Councils

*Sichilima Malango Ginno, Katele Philip Kalale and Nachela Margaret*

#### **1 Frame of reference**

Zambia's involvement in the fight for the rights of the child is not new. It is a well-documented fact that Zambia is a signatory to the United Nations charter on human rights, including the rights of the children and has since many years been involved in many domesticated activities to maintain this commitment. The country signed the International Convention on Children's Rights in September 1990 and ratified the commitment in December 1991. Zambia is also a signatory to the African Charter on Human Rights. The Zambian constitution addresses issues of human rights as well as the rights of children.

Under the Zambian law, children have rights and responsibilities and as such all citizens are obliged to respect and uphold these rights. Children are given the rights to protection, provision and participation. One of the aims in the Zambian Policy of education is to awaken concern of civil liberties and human rights for the consolidation of the democratic character of the Zambian society (Ministry of education, 1996 p.52). The Ministry of education has been promoting these rights through the introduction of civic education at basic, high school and university level of education.

One other frame of reference conspicuous of pupils at Muyombe high school and other schools in Zambia is that pupils are not free to express themselves freely before the teachers or parents. This is deeply rooted in the cultural practices of most tribes

in Zambia which do not allow pupils to ask questions as this is considered being disrespectful. However, this is a contradiction to the principle of human rights that allows pupils and teachers too to critically scrutinize and question facts, ideas and beliefs without hesitation or fear of being victimized. The child is protected through the establishment of the victims support unit (VSU) under the Zambia Police Service. This unit among other duties helps the children to report cases of domestic violence against children, child sexual abuse and all cases of violation of the rights of children. To ensure protection of the girl child, the Zambian government has through the ministry of education, introduced the re- entry policy. This is a policy that allows girls that fall pregnant to still continue with their education after they have delivered. The policy is working well though it is being abused by the girls themselves partly due to little or no proper information on the policy. The ministry of community development and social services is another line ministry that provides educational bursary schemes for deserving children who cannot manage to pay all school and user fees. This has helped a number of children to access education though many more children still drop out of school due to inability to access the bursary scheme. This may be attributed to lack of information on how to benefit from the funds. The need for high quality education need not be over emphasized. When provision rights are respected, it has a direct effect on education which avails opportunities for pupils to develop emotionally, morally, spiritually, socially and politically so as to be increasingly able to cope with life problems (Ministry of Education 1977, p. 5).

The government has continued encouraging non-governmental organizations (NGO) to partner with school so as to help in any way they can to ensure that children are not disadvantaged in their quest to get educated. However, although all these efforts have been put in place to address the plight of the child, not much has been achieved. As a result, many still face challenges of little or no rights in protection, provision and participation. A number of cases of child rights abuse at school and house hold levels continue to be recorded country wide.

It is against this background that the team from Zambia undertook a pilot project dubbed “Raising awareness on child rights among teachers, pupils and the community through school and class councils”, a pilot project carried out at Muyombe high school in Northern Province of Zambia. From what has been discussed above, it is clearly observable that the team did not work in a vacuum but had some reference point of departure.

## **2 Purpose (Intended output & outcome)**

The project aimed at raising awareness in child rights, participation, protection and provision rights. The rationale behind this was that there is little or no awareness of

the rights of children by teachers, parents and the pupils themselves. The project hoped that with the raised awareness of the rights of children, there would be increased participation of pupils in both learning and teaching, increased pupil retention and concentration in school work. It was envisioned that raised child, teacher and community awareness would also develop a sense of belonging and innovation. This would in turn ensure that the school environment would be drastically improved for both teaching and learning.

The raised awareness was meant to change teachers, pupils and the community attitude towards the school and community environment. At present, there is a very poor attitude towards the environment in terms of pupils and the community involving themselves in activities that promote environmental degradation.

We aimed at seeing a marked change in the care of school furniture, the school surrounding in terms of a reduction in throwing of litter and garbage. At community level, we hoped to see a reduction in cutting of trees and caring of rivers and other natural resources which form the environment.

Through the awareness of the rights of the child we hoped to see a big response in the support of the school going child particularly the girl child whose rights has been constantly been violated by the community especially through early marriages and tolerated unwanted pregnancies.

### **3 Methodology (Activities)**

The project targeted 520 learners, of whom 227 were girls and 297 boys. The project targeted 25 teachers at Muyombe high school and a selected 50 parents from the community. These had little or no information on the rights of the child. The project tried to carry out activities through the school and class councils to raise awareness of the rights of children.

The Zambian team applied a number of pedagogical strategies in the implementation of the project. These stem majorly from the inspirations from the management course attended in Lund University in May to June 2010. A lot of initiatives by the Swedish educational systems and other educational practices from other countries intensified our desire to make children's rights to participation, protection and provision, a reality in Zambia.

The follow up seminars in Uganda availed the team other well intentioned child friendly practices which further influenced the methodological path the team took to implement the project. The Uganda follow up seminar was backed by another country meeting on the Copperbelt Province of Zambia with the team mentors, Dr

Bodil and Dr. Maria. Again the team drew valuable experiences from the consultative pieces of advice from the not only the mentors but the Copperbelt team which has been implementing projects on the rights of the child.

The team formed class and school councils by following a tool kit for establishing school and class councils. The school and class council is a platform on which pupils express their felt needs and helps them create solutions to identified challenges.

In setting up the school and class council at Muyombe high school, the team had to hold awareness campaigns within the school to all the teachers and the pupils for them to understand and appreciate the concept of school and class councils and to appreciate the rights of children.

Having made awareness campaigns, the grade teachers were asked to spear head the formation of the class council through a democratic process. Pupils themselves campaigned and had campaign managers who brought out strong points as to why they felt their chosen candidate could be the ideal person to represent them as class council representative.

Pupils created an atmosphere of campaign. Posters were stuck in strategic areas of the school. An election date was set by a committee that was chosen to ensure free and fair election. During the actual poll day, election monitors were put in place. These were chosen from among the pupils with the help of link teachers, particularly those that teach civic education and had shown remarkable interest in the rights of the child.

The actual poll day was characterized by the presence of a committee called the 'electoral committee'. The school administration gave the whole afternoon for pupils to cast their votes using improvised ballot papers and ballot boxes. The school Press club covered the event by carrying out interviews to selected pupils. The news on the election was later read out during school assembly and this gave the chosen pupils a feeling of importance and self-worth.

The class council members chosen from each class combined to form the school council which regularly meets with the guidance from the link teachers to discuss issues that affect them. These issues are tabled with the school administration with possible suggested solutions on how to improve the school in its different facets. The class council comprises two pupil representatives, a boy and a girl. These hold meetings with their class with the help of the grade teacher but at other times are encouraged to hold the meetings by themselves as a way of leadership training.

The two class council members collectively form the school council. This means the school council is the number of classes multiplied by the two class council members. The executive of the council is elected from among the school council members.

### **Results (Actual Output and Outcome)**

It is amazing to see how the efforts put in the management of the school from the perspective of pupil involvement can produce a whole range of change that is beneficial to the school. It is prudent to report that the effect of the school and class council has been an influential tool to the positive results that we are able to see.

### **Teachers**

⊕ There is a marked improvement on teacher punctuality for duties. The pupils as a class council have been able to raise complaints of poor time management by some teachers whose habits have been to report late for teaching and knock off early. Because the pupils have been made aware that education is a right and not a privilege, and that the teachers have a contractual obligation to keep time, pupils have either approached the teacher in question through their link teachers who either talk to him or her directly or report to school administration which deals with the issue and resolves it. There is marked improvement in this direction.

⊕ There has also been a drastic improvement on lesson preparation by the teachers in the school. The concept of pupil participation in issues that involve them has had an amazing positive impact on the teachers as they too are getting motivated and reminded too by the pupils concern for their education. It is for this reason that teachers are seriously preparing their lessons before teaching and are finding it more enjoyable and professional. One teacher had this to say about pupil participation in relation to lesson preparation:

⊕ It is so reassuring to know you are going to teach a class of learners that are expecting nothing short of learning, so lesson preparation is a must'.

It has been noticed that there is an improvement in classroom curriculum delivery. Planning a lesson is one thing and delivering it to learners is yet another thing. With pupil awareness on their rights and particularly the right to education, teachers are delivering the required class curriculum to the learners. This is called progress in education. It is hoped that more schools should benefit from this approach to education provision.

⊖ There is more teacher pupil contact time as a result of paradigm shift from the traditional “arm’s length” relationship between teacher and pupil to a teacher- pupil relationship based on high moral values anchored on respect for human dignity. The arm’s length relationship meant that the teacher was to be feared by the pupil and had to keep a reasonable distance away from him or her. The negative effect of this was that the pupil had no one to consult from. School therefore meant very little to the learner with the result that poor performance was recorded daily. This scenario is changing with the active participation of learners in their education.

## **Pupils**

⊖ Pupils have assumed a more responsible approach to issues affecting them at school and at home based on the understanding of rights having responsibilities. The approach to problem solving is no longer the confrontational nature such as vandalism, vulgar language, insolence, truancy and anti- School and anti- social behaviors. Pupils want things done in a spirit of consultation, participation and transparency.

⊖ By virtue of pupils being members of the class and school councils respectively, pupils feel they are in leadership position and as such they say and act as leaders. In this sense, it is felt that through the class and school council concept, a cadre of leaders in this generation and in the generation to come is being created. This is evidenced in the drastic reduction of riots and vandalism at school and quick apprehension of suspected pupils with riotous behaviors.

⊖ There is more care and concern for the school environment as more pupils are getting involved in activities that do not lead to environmental degradation. The school is no longer littered with garbage and other environmentally harmful substances. There have been suggestions from pupils on how to use local and cost effective materials to improve sanitation in school. Such initiatives have included weaving baskets in which to throw litter, digging rubbish pits in which to bury garbage, watering the surrounding to improve vegetation and keep the dust away. These initiatives have worked very well.

⊖ Academic performance for most pupils has been enhanced. It is safe to say that with the improved environment by the pupils themselves, there is a feeling of belonging and a bigger sense of pride in their school. The effect of this is that pupils want to spend more time at school and interact between and among themselves in academic matters. Pupils want to make the school a learning experience.

⊖ A good number of pupils are breaking away from the traditional practice of not asking or critically scrutinizing issues. The raised awareness is availing the pupils

with the freedom to question why certain situations are the way they are. This is already proving to be helpful and progressive because brilliant ideas on problem solving and problem shooting are now being captured. The one good example to this scenario is the traditional process of selecting the members of the prefecture body of the school. The practice at Muyombe high school and indeed at many other high schools is that teachers sit to select pupils that can sit on the prefecture body. This scenario has proved very unreliable because pupils chosen sooner or later prove to be problem leaders and are usually demoted from the position of leadership. With the involvement of the pupils to participate in choosing their own leaders, very stable leaders and a stable prefecture body have been established.

⌘ There is a reduction in tension at school arising from what the menu at the dining hall is all about. Again the teachers and administration have usually decided on what the menu should comprise of. This has been necessitated by the availability of food and funds to purchase the food. However, with the pupils being involved, brilliant ideas have come on board and this has solved the tension that in fact gave administrators a very tough time.

### **Community**

⌘ It is satisfying to note that the community has kept on taking an active role in the life of the school. There are such initiatives as the mother support groups (MSG) which comes to give support to the pupils in terms of counseling and provision of material items. Pupils are free to interact with these groups and to learn from their experiences in life.

⌘ The school has taken advantage of such functions as the Annual General Meetings (AGM) to make parents aware of the activities of the school council and to show changes that the school has assumed as a result of the council activities. The community has started showing appreciations in the council activities and is pledging support to the school and the pupils.

⌘ School and class councils are helping realize the government policy of decentralization. This policy gives power to the people to make decisions that arise from their felt needs. Because pupils identify their own challenges, they make possible solutions based on available resources. It is believed that this wonderful platform to train pupils, at an early stage the values and tenets of decentralization so that when they assume political office, they are solidly adhered to such ideals.

## Discussion

The concept of school and class councils as a conduit of change and democratic governance of schools has come to stay in the Zambian educational system and needs to be supported by all stake holders. There are many reasons one would advance for this sentiment:

It is clear that every school must teach as well as practice human rights and mutual respect for the learners for whom the entire educational system is created. As pupils learn to participate and are provided for, they learn to reciprocate the gesture. This is what results in mutuality. Every teacher therefore, is bound to share this responsibility. With the awareness of child rights, there is now a mutual relationship between the learner and the teacher at Muyombe high school. (Ministry of Education 2000, p.8) substantiates this by stating that awareness of human rights implies treating pupils, teachers and other stake holders with respect and dignity irrespective of their gender, religion, ethnic origin, professional or any discriminatory characteristics.

Developing countries need an efficient educational system that should be responsive to the many challenges facing them. Efficiency can be achieved when the learners are involved from an early part of their training. (Yukl, 2010, p390) maintains that efficiency is the use of people and resources to carry out essential operations in a way that minimizes costs and avoids wasted effort and resources. If education is to assume the meaning for which it was intended, there must be an efficient use of not only the pupils but the teachers and the community through awareness of the rights of the child.

Muyombe high school as a pilot school has made a number of educational advances from the time the project was launched. The awareness campaigns that are ongoing can be singled out to be a major contributor to the good discipline that all are able to see now.

There is an overwhelming demand for access to education from many parents and pupils from other schools. This is rightly being attributed to the fact that pupils from Muyombe high school speak well of their school and are proud of it. Many are able to proudly point at a particular project in school as a product of their involvement.

The school council has been instrumental in inspiring other learners in school to work towards achieving set goals. Against this background, one may safely say that the school council gives creates a vision for the school. It sets the tone for other

pupils to follow. In this case the advancement of the rights of the child has an effect of promoting a cadre of leaders that should take the country to better heights.

Poor or no participation in issues that affect a certain cadre of people has been known to cause anarchy for a country, institution or organization. In the recent past, there have been many riots in many schools in Zambia supposedly from little or no active participation in matters affecting the welfare of the pupils. Much property has been lost as a result and many pupils sent away from school. These have become social deviants and a problem to the government because of being economically irrelevant to the production set up of the country. Participation rights therefore are not just beneficial at school level but at societal level as well.

When provision rights are upheld at school level, the beneficiaries are more likely to practice the same rights for the benefit of other members of society. The school of today shares the responsibilities with home and local communities of passing on that part of the cultural heritage which is meaningful and constructive in today's society.

One sees that the implementation of the school council as a method of creating awareness on the rights of the pupils is in line with ministry of education policy on access and participation which states that good quality education brings many personal, social, economic and educational benefits and also promotes desirable attitudes, value and ways of behavior and opens the minds of pupils to new ideas and methods. This increases the productivity of the participants (ministry of education p.14)

## Reflection

In the implementation of the pilot project, there have been successes and challenges too that are worth noting:

### Successes

- Succeeded in meeting the family of change agents in Sweden at Lund University and learnt and shared valuable experiences that have formed the road map to this implementation. The vast pool of experiences that all countries present presented gave the team comparisons in where the country is and what needs to be done to reach other successful country have reached.
- Were successful in getting the kind permission of our Zambian government to allow the team to travel abroad to learn what other countries around the globe are doing to address the issue of child rights. Appreciated the gesture which availed the team with information on the where the country is on course and where it is lagging behind.
- Succeeded in holding awareness meetings with stake holders with the support of the District Education Board Secretary's office and the school administration.
- Succeeded in forming school and class council thereby broadening participation of pupils in school affairs.
- Managed to provide leadership training to members of the school council to equip them with management skills on running the council.
- Successfully carried out leadership training to the teachers under the continuous professional development programs in relation to the child rights and school council.
- Succeeded in carrying out designed programs by the school council such as vegetable garden, the keep Muyombe clean campaign. The concept of 'keep Muyombe clean' is domesticated initiative from the country's program of 'keep Zambia clean'. The idea of the school vegetable garden was to make Provision right not just a concept but a reality.
- Recorded a slight reduction on the number of early marriages and cases of unwanted pregnancies as a result of debates and symposiums on the consequences of the vices.
- Have seen a reduction of cases of vandalism, fighting and the use of vulgar language by pupils as a result of change of attitude towards the respect for human dignity and worth.

## Challenges

- Resentment from some teachers on the change process from the traditional autocratic methods of relating with pupils to one which recognizes the learners as partners in education.
- Resentment from some pupils who have been used to being told what to do from the teacher or someone above them.
- Slow pace at which the desired results are obtained due to other commitments by the change agents and other stake holders.
- Some parents remain unsupportive of the quest to help the learners realize their full potentialities through according them the right to participate, to be provided for and to be protected.

## Way Forward

1. Human rights and particularly the rights of the child must be part of the curriculum for all grades, which is grade one to grade twelve and should also be a study area for all trainee teachers in teacher training colleges and the university. This will ensure that issues of child and human rights are defended and protected by all school staff.
2. Schools in Zambia must create initiatives of competing at zonal, district, provincial and national levels in terms of upholding human rights.
3. Government of the Republic of Zambia must allocate meaningful resources such as transport, teaching and learning materials and budgetary allocations to schools to enable them carry out programs that will promote human rights. This political will must be the benchmark of success in child protection.
4. Human rights issues are a global issue and as such, economically developed countries and those countries that have a track record of success in upholding human rights, must give unconditional support to developing countries and particularly to countries with a high record of human and child right abuse. Countries proving to do better in human rights should be given the mandate to promote these human rights in other countries as they share their success stories.
5. African countries should create forum where educationists, human rights activists and other interested stake holders should meet as regions to strategize on how to make the fight against human rights abuse a reality. Strategies should include how to do away with traditional practices that disadvantage

women and children and should also discuss alternatives to these practices. It is important to dwell on alternatives to human rights abuse because most of the people that practice a traditional way of handling issues and that may be violating human rights do so without the slightest feeling of guilt. This is because they may have no other alternative to doing something that has shaped their way of life for many decades.

6. The ministry of education in Zambia and all other countries should formulate or intensify policy on the issues of child rights. This will help the schools to have a direction of purpose in implementing the child right campaign.
7. Top management in the Ministry of Education must undergo training as change agents. This will give a noticeable impact on the implementation of child rights in Zambian schools. When top management understands and appreciates the need for the change process as change agents themselves, they will take an active role in championing the cause of child rights. They will use resources to realize the goals of the cause.
8. Communities should be divergent in what help they offer to the school and the child in particular. Currently, there seems to be a lack of initiatives that address the rights of the child. What has been seen is the usual help which somehow has become routine and uninteresting.
9. School visits for the purposes of intellectual and social intercourse should be encouraged so that provinces that are established like the Copperbelt and Lusaka provinces should visit those that are not as active. This will not only create uniformity but will also enhance the spirit of togetherness.
10. The media in Zambia should be availed with the opportunity to interact with the school setting and the stake holders in order to empower them with what to report and influence their clientele. Wickenberg et al (2009, p. 50) contend that the media is very influential in giving information on the child protection and that this information could take various forms such as T.V ,radios, newspapers, magazines and internet.

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, the experiences accrued from implementing school and class councils show that the road map to this success cannot be attained in isolation. It requires the concerted efforts of all stakeholders who also include pupils. School is supposed to be the most important setting for imparting the three P:s: Provision, Participation

and Protection. When pupils get involved in issues that affect them, the whole educational and child rights package is bound to succeed. It is therefore important that no education practitioner deviates from this method of education provision. School managers should create interventions that lead to protection of the child, particularly the burden of house hold chores that some learners suffer. When schools create an environment at school where boys and girls have equal rights, opportunities and obligations, they help indirectly in promoting a culture of equal rights, opportunities and obligations at home and in communities. This therefore has a cascading effect of replicating a generation of people who are conscious to human rights and human dignity. School councils should not merely be seen in the smaller context but in a wider context with far reaching positive consequences beneficial to human life.

The project at Muyombe has been an eye opener and is still an eye opener since it is still ongoing. From the administrative point of view, awareness in child rights has made it easier to administer the school. Teachers too have found the project rather helpful and encouraging. Pupils who have since completed school from the time the project was incepted have shown reluctance to leave school because of the attachment created.

## References

Ministry of education (2000) The Basic School Curriculum Framework, Curriculum Development Center, Lusaka.

Ministry of Education (1996) Educating Our Future, Lusaka

Ministry of Education (1977) Educational Reforms, Lusaka

Per .w, Agneta. W, Ulf. L, Bodil .R, Richard. S and Bereket Y. (2009)

Taking Child Rights Seriously, Reflections on five years of an International Training Program. Yukl .G (2010) Leadership in Organizations, Pearson Prentice Hall, New Jersey