



Child Rights and School Climate: How Rights-Based Practices Shape Student Experiences. A Case Study of Bondo Primary School in Dedza District, Malawi.

Hadija Chikondi Amadu¹, Dr. Victor Mwila²

¹*Department Of Education, Dmi-St. Eugene University*

²*Phd, Lecturer Dmi-St. Eugene University, P. O. Box 330081, Chibombo – Zambia.*

ABSTRACT

This study was centered around child rights and school climate looking at how rights-based practices shape student experiences. The study aimed at assessing the level of understanding of human rights and responsibilities among students in primary schools, analyze the effect of interpretation of human rights and responsibility on the compliance to school rules and policies among students in primary schools, and to explain the effects of the way human rights and responsibilities are interpreted on the obedience to authority among students in primary schools. The study adopted a mono qualitative research design. It has been found that the participants all the students know about human rights and they are aware that they have human rights. In addition to the knowledge of their human rights, the students are aware of the responsibility that they have with regards to the human rights. The study discovered that being sent back when they are late to school or class is a deep violation of their human rights. The study revealed that the students view punishments as human rights violations. This means that the students consider all disciplinary punishments as a violation of their human rights. The findings highlight that stiff punishments are a violation of the right of children such the right to be protected from being hurt or harmed. The perception is that any punishment that the students are subjected to is a violating of their human rights regardless.

Introduction

Human rights are inherent to everyone alive regardless of the nation of origin, skin color, language, ethnic, social status, academic status, and even economic status (Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019). The united nations stipulates that everyone is entitled to human rights without discrimination (United Nations, 2020). Human rights come with a responsibility. It is to be taken into consideration greatly that without responsibility, human rights are abused by the holder and violated.

Human rights gives each and every person the obligation to protect and respect the rights of others, and thus responsibility (Unicef, 2015). The actions and decisions that an individual embarks should encompass respect of other peoples rights. This means that no one has the right to violate the rights of another (Unicef, 2015).

In the contemporary world, issues have emerged concerning the practice of human rights and freedoms in the face of governing state laws, institutional policies, social structures, and behavioral and codes of conduct. The contemporary human rights encompass political and civil rights that includes free will, freedom of speech, right to education, and freedom from torture, cruel and other inhuman treatment (Australian Human Rights Commission, 2020).

Just as in other segments of the institutions across the world, the education sector has evolved and has developed quite a number of human rights approaches. These human rights and freedoms include right to education itself, right to access information equally, right to be treated equally in the school setting, freedom of expression, freedom from torture, cruel and other inhuman treatment in the school setting among others (Amnesty International, 2024)

Students in schools are equipped with knowledge on their rights, as both children, human beings, and students. The Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC), adopted in 1989, outlines fundamental child rights, emphasizing the importance of inclusive and supportive school environments. As education systems evolve, integrating rights-based approaches into school management and pedagogical practices has been increasingly prioritized. The same applies to Malawi where various educational policies have incorporated child rights and human rights.

The Malawi Government has ratified several international conventions on child rights, including the CRC, and incorporated these principles into its national laws and policies. The Malawi Education Act of 2013 mandates that all children, regardless of gender, ethnicity, or disability, should have access to free and quality education. Additionally, the National Child Policy (2016) and National Education Sector Plan (2018-2022) emphasize child-centered education and the implementation of rights-based approaches in schools (Ministry of Education, 2020).

Problem statement

The presence of human rights and freedoms in school curriculums and syllabuses, it has led to the expansion and reach of knowledge to a wider scope with the majority of children – students now having an idea of what their rights and freedoms are as students. According to the education curriculum for Malawi, a number of subjects include topics of human rights and these are present in almost all the classes in the formal education structure. This leads to the widening reach and knowledge of human rights. In addition to that, a study in Nigeria found that there a lot of awareness and knowledge of human rights among secondary students (Akiri, 2013).

However, despite the awareness and knowledge of human rights, freedoms, and responsibilities, there have been an observation of high rate of irresponsibility and in compliance to school policies and rules, and questioning of authority and issues against punishment under the idea of practicing human rights. Students tend to walk away with in compliance and lack of obedience while claiming that it is their right to education even if they do not comply to rules and policies. Furthermore, students evade punishment for lack of compliance by claiming the freedom from torture.

This defeats the whole purpose of human rights and responsibilities. Despite international and national commitments to child rights in education, there remains a significant gap in understanding how these principles translate into everyday school experiences and behavior or conduct of students. While previous research has explored policy implementation at national and regional levels, limited attention has been given to the practical implications of rights-based education in specific districts such as Dedza. There is an unanswered question regard as to whether the education, awareness, and knowledge of human rights and responsibilities has been properly understood and interpreted especially by students in primary schools.

Therefore, this study attempts to evaluate child rights and school climate and how rights based practices shape of student experiences and thus the effect that the way human rights and responsibilities are interpreted has on the way students behave, carry and conduct themselves in schools with respect to authority, rules and policies of the school.

Literature review

A study on the perception of students on human rights in Turkish secondary schools found that human rights education has been incorporate as compulsory in school curriculum. However, the study found that students in the Turkish schools do not have adequate knowledge on human rights. The study revealed that the students perceive that human right courses have a little impact in empowering students (Çayır & Bağlı, 2011). The study revealed that no one cares about the presence of human rights in the courses at school. The study suggests that human rights education should be revised along with a global focus and appropriate methodology (Çayır & Bağlı, 2011). Another study was carried to assess the student's understanding of institutional practices and human rights dimension. The findings found that students are aware of their human rights and responsibilities and are aware of what they are doing when they violate and abuse their rights and infringe the human rights and freedoms of other people, in this particular case, students (Barton, 2019).

A similar study was carried to assess the students' perceptions of their rights in elementary and secondary schools. The findings of the study characterize students' human rights perceptions as intuitive. The study reveals that the perceptions of the students on human rights are not grounded in legal rules but in students' personal insights (Perry-Hazan, 2021). The findings also identify key factors affecting students' perceptions: school context, national context, and students' individual characteristics. The conclusions underscore that school rights-based practices, student body and school staff diversity, and school relationships influence students' rights consciousness (Perry-Hazan, 2021). Another study was carried to assess the level of students' human rights awareness at the University of Education, Winneba. The study adopted a pragmatic research paradigm using the mixed-method approach with an explanatory sequential design (Eshun, 2023). The population for the study was the level 400 students of the University of Education, Winneba for the 2022/2023 academic year. A total of 368 students were carefully selected hinging on the Krejcie and Morgan tabulation formula from the total population of 9,408 final year students for the quantitative data. Sixteen (16) students were purposively selected from the sample size of 368 for a focus group discussion (Eshun, 2023).

Standard based students' academic rights and freedom questionnaires were adapted to merit the research context. The focus group discussion guide was designed from the quantitative questionnaire for triangulation purposes (Eshun, 2023). Descriptive statistics (Mean and Standard Deviation) and inferential statistics (Independent sample t-test) were employed for the quantitative analysis, whilst qualitative content analysis was used for the qualitative analysis. As an insider, positionality issues and ethical considerations were professionally addressed to avoid any influence on the outcome of the research. In a global context, rights-based practices have been associated with improved school climates and better educational outcomes. Anderson and Pardeck (2013) highlight that schools incorporating child rights into their policies and daily practices often experience reductions in bullying, discrimination, and corporal punishment, fostering a more supportive and inclusive school atmosphere. These positive school climates, in turn, enhance student well-being, academic engagement, and performance. Another study examined bullying as a form of violence among Ghanaian Senior High School students. The problem identified was that notwithstanding Ghana Government's intervention in promoting and defending children's rights through Human Rights Education, coupled with the remarkable efforts being made by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and civil society organisations (CSOs) in enlightening the citizenry of their rights and freedoms, much violence is prevalent among students in Ghana (Odumah, 2013).

A study on how adolescents understand, support, and practice human resources was done in twenty-seven countries. The study had a sample size of 88,000 14 year old adolescents. The assessment of knowledge pertaining to human rights compared with other forms of civic knowledge, and in students attitudes towards promoting and practicing human rights found that countries with governments that pay more attention to human rights in intergovernmental discourse ave students who perform better on human rights knowledge items (Torney-Purta, et al., 2008). Students' experiences of

democracy at school and with international issues have a positive association with their knowledge of human rights. Significant gender differences also exist (Torney-Purta, et al., 2008). Looking at rights-related attitudes, students with more knowledge of human rights, more frequent engagement with international topics, and more open class and school climates held stronger norms supporting social movement citizenship, had more positive attitudes toward immigrants' rights, and were more politically efficacious (Torney-Purta, et al., 2008).

A study on the degree of obedience to authority found that cultural background has a strong influence on disobedience to authority. The study found that students accepting a western-style learning pattern and receiving it in an earlier age tend to have a higher disobedient rate due to diverse aspects, such as learning styles, uncertainty avoidance and individual developing patterns. This shows that the disobedience in students is not related to human rights knowledge, it has deep roots in cultural background, education background, and age (Yu, 2021).

Behavioral theory

Behavioral theory which is also known as the behavioral learning theory was developed in the early 20th century. This theory focuses on how people learn through their interactions with the surrounding that they find themselves in. The theory suggests that a stimulus in the environment and its consequences shape the behavior and that learning occurs through a process of operant conditioning (National University, 2025). In the case of students conduct with respect to the human rights as their environment, it implies that the students behave in ways that they think they are exercising their human rights and freedoms. The perception and existence of human rights and freedoms frameworks shapes their behaviors.

Methodology

Design: This research study adopted a mono research design and it was a qualitative research. The case study methodology is particularly well-suited to this research as it allows for an in-depth, context-specific analysis of child rights practices in schools, which cannot be fully understood through broad statistical analyses.

Population: According to the headmaster of Bondo primary school, the school has around 480 students. Therefore the population of the study was 480 students from all the classes and that is from standard 1 to standard 8.

Sampling: The study adopted random sampling because all the students at the school had the capacity to give the information that this study is looking for, therefore anyone could be picked.

Data collection: Data was collected using an interview and focus group discussion

Data analysis: This research study analyzed the data collected using interviews and focus group discussions using thematic data analysis and content data analysis.

Findings and discussion

All the students know about human rights and they are aware that they have human rights and the responsibility that comes with the exercising of the human rights. The participants explained that they have the right to go to school, the right to be in class, the right to access school materials including books. The study further established that the students know that they have the right to food and right to be treated fairly by teachers. Their understanding is that they should not be subjected to punishment. Lastly, the participants recognized that they are children so they should be allowed to play because they have the right to play. This aligns with the findings of a research which found that students are aware of their human rights and responsibilities and are aware of what they are doing when they violate and abuse their rights and infringe the human rights and freedoms of other people, in this particular case, students (Barton, 2019)

The findings reveal that they have the right to be in class, right to play with other students and themselves, right to fair punishment and the right to be protected and not subjected to harm by teacher through beating. The students know that they are responsible for taking care of school property, they have the responsibility to go to school, the responsibility to avoid stealing other people's belongings, and the responsibility to do school chores. In agreement, Anderson and Pardeck (2013) highlight that schools incorporating child rights into their policies and daily practices often experience reductions in bullying, discrimination, and corporal punishment, fostering a more supportive and inclusive school atmosphere. These positive school climates, in turn, enhance student well-being, academic engagement, and performance

The students consider that their right to education has been violated when they are sent back when late and the students view punishments as human rights violations. The participants highlighted that stiff punishments are a violation of the right of children such the right to be protected from being hurt or harmed. The study highlighted that some punishments are totally unfair and unrealistic for the primary student. The participants consider this as a violation of the right to fair punishment. The findings reveal that the teachers violate the rights of the students through beating them, sending the students out of class, sending the students back home when late, and giving the students stiff and hard labour punishments. The participants stated that the rights give them the freedom to what they want to some extent. The assessment of knowledge pertaining to human rights compared with other forms of civic knowledge, and in students attitudes towards promoting and practicing human rights found that countries with governments that pay more attention to human rights in intergovernmental discourse ave students who perform better on human rights knowledge items (Torney-Purta, et al., 2008). Students' experiences of democracy at school and with international issues have a positive association with their knowledge of human rights. Looking at rights-

related attitudes, students with more knowledge of human rights, more frequent engagement with international topics, and more open class and school climates held stronger norms supporting social movement citizenship, had more positive attitudes toward immigrants' rights, and were more politically efficacious (Torney-Purta, et al., 2008).

Conclusion

According to the findings of the study, it has been found that the participants all the students know about human rights and they are aware that they have human rights. The students know a lot about their right to access education. The participants explained that they have the right to go to school, the right to be in class, the right to access school materials including books. The study revealed that the understanding is that they should not be subjected to punishment. The findings reveal that they have the right to be in class, right to play with other students and themselves, right to fair punishment and the right to be protected and not subjected to harm by teacher through beating. The findings reveal that the students know that they are responsible for taking care of school property, they have the responsibility to go to school, the responsibility to avoid stealing other people's belongings, and the responsibility to do school chores. The study discovered that being sent back when they are late to school or class is a deep violation of their human rights. This means that the students consider that when they are sent back, the teachers do violate the rights of the students. It has been revealed that the students consider that their right to education has been violated when they are sent back when late. The study revealed that the students view punishments as human rights violations. This means that the students consider all disciplinary punishments as a violation of their human rights. The findings highlight that stiff punishments are a violation of the right of children such the right to be protected from being hurt or harmed. The study findings reveal that it is a violation of human rights to some extent. The perception is that any punishment that the students are subjected to is a violating of their human rights regardless. The study discovered that there is a perception that the rights, which the students have, gives them the freedom to what they want to some extent.

Recommendations

The government should ensure that the ministry of education should revisit its curriculum in as far as lessons about human rights are concerned. The findings have revealed a major different view concerning human rights and responsibility. This shall lead to a breed of new leaders and individuals who understand human rights differently. The schools should ensure that the topics about human rights and responsibilities are taught with clarity to avoid creating wrong messages and interpretations among students to avoid disobedience. The civil society and law groups should carry awareness campaigns in schools to clarify how human rights and responsibilities work together with the legal framework in order to emphasize on how to execute ones rights in the context of the governing laws and policies including those at school. Students should be taught how to exercise their rights and how exercising their rights has the potential to violate other people's rights and how the exercising of rights aligns with laws and policies of any place including the school. A comparative research study carried in secondary schools and tertiary schools to differentiate or compare these findings from primary school and those of secondary and tertiary school in order to establish one conclusion of how human rights and responsibilities and how students perceive them. In other words, a similar study to be carried in secondary schools, universities and college.

REFERENCES

- Akiri, . A. A., 2013. Students' and Human Rights Awareness in Secondary Schools' Environment in Delta State. *Journa of Education Policy*, pp. 1-9.
- Amnesty International, 2024. Human rights friendly schools. [Online] Available at: <https://www.amnesty.org/en/human-rights-education/human-rights-friendly-schools/> [Accessed 12 February 2025].
- Australian Human Rights Commision, 2020. An Introduction to Human Rights. [Online] Available at: <https://humanrights.gov.au/our-work/education/introduction-human-rights> [Accessed 12 February 2025].
- Bandawe, T., 2020. Assessing the impact of health centre management committees in curbing drug pilferage and promoting public service delivery; a case of chitipa district. pp. 1-88.
- Barton, K. C., 2019. Students' Understanding of Institutional Practices: The Missing Dimension in Human Rights Education. *American Educational Research Journal*, 57(1).
- Çayır, K. & Bağlı, M. T., 2011. 'No - one respects them anyway': secondary school students' perceptions of human rights education in Turkey. *Intercultural Education*, 22(1), pp. 1-14.
- Eshun, I., 2023. Assessing Students' Level of Awareness of their Constitutional Human Rights. *Asian Journal of Education and Social Studies*, 49(4), pp. 467-482.
- MacDonald, S. & Headlam, N., 2005. *Research Methods Handbook: Introductory guide to research methods for social research*. Manchester: Center for Local Economical Strategies.
- National University, 2025. Behaviorism in Education: What Is Behavioral Learning Theory?. [Online] Available at: <https://www.nu.edu/blog/behaviorism-in-education/> [Accessed 12 February 2025].
- Odumah, L., 2013. Investigating Bullying as a Violation of Human Rights among Students in Ghanaian Senior High Schools. *Research on Humanities and Social Sciences* , 3(17), pp. 1-9.

Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights, 2019. What are human rights?. [Online] Available at: <https://www.ohchr.org/en/what-are-human-rights>[Accessed 12 February 2025].

Perry-Hazan, L., 2021. Students' Perceptions of Their Rights in School: A Systematic Review of the International Literature. *Review of Educational Research*, 91(6).

Saunders, M., Lewis, P. & Thornhill, A., 2023. *Research Methods for Business Students*. 9th ed. Edinburgh: Pearson Education Limited.

Torney-Purta, J., Wilkenfeld, B. & Barber, C., 2008. How Adolescents in 27 Countries Understand, Support, and Practice Human Rights. *Journal of social issues*, 64(4), pp. 857-880.

Unicef, 2015. Introduction to the Human Rights Based Approach. [Online] Available at: <https://www.unicef.org/child-rights-convention/what-are-human-rights>[Accessed 10 February 2025].

United Nations, 2020. Human Rights. [Online] Available at: <https://www.un.org/en/global-issues/human-rights> [Accessed 12 February 2025].

Yu, J., 2021. The Exploration and Prediction of the Students' Degree of Obedience to Authority in the Classroom Context under Different Education Systems. *Proceedings of the 2021 4th International Conference on Humanities Education and Social Sciences (ICHESS 2021)*.