



Exploration of teachers' understanding of children's rights and classroom practices in Zambia

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Abstract

Although Zambia is among countries that have ratified the convention on the rights of the child (CRC), it is doubtful if teachers are aware of the existence of the CRC since the contents of the CRC have not been embedded in the school curricula. It still remains a puzzle how teachers in Zambia negotiate classroom practices in the absence of classroom policies on children's rights. This study, whose aim was to explore teachers' understanding of children's rights and classroom practices, employed a qualitative research method. Data was collected through interview via skype in which six participants were involved. This study revealed that the teacher's knowledge about children's rights is not linked to the CRC. This was evident by their inability to mention any article from the Convention. Further revelation of the teachers' understanding of rights is only based on general knowledge of rights. This research also found that children's rights are not included in the education system in Zambia, which serves to prove that teachers do not teach children's rights in their classrooms.

Keywords: Children's rights, convention, CRC

1. Introduction

The term 'rights' has generated diverse definitions by different scholars and has further generated different perspectives on what constitutes children's rights (Alderson 2000; Freeman, 1997) ^[1, 8]. According to UNESCO (1990) ^[19], access to education constitutes a right. However, since the adoption of the Universal Declaration of Human Rights in 1948, the United Nations has adopted many legally binding international human rights treaties and agreements including the UN Convention on the Rights of the Child (1989). The CRC has explicitly focused on the 'best interest of the child' (Urinbojev *et al* 2016) ^[22]. The principle of the best interest of the child is a major building block of the CRC and one of the most discussed terms in the convention as it emphasises that consideration of the best interest of the child as the guiding principle of all decisions and actions involving children (Palmqvist, 2006) ^[17]. Countries that have ratified the CRC have officially undertaken an obligation to ensure that children are treated as the claim-holder who have fundamental rights as individual persons, and that it is the parents, other adults and state (educational) authorities who are the duty-bearers (Freeman 1996; Howe and Covell 2010) ^[7, 6]. Although every country in the world has ratified at least one of the conventions, and many have ratified most of them, the CRC is the most widely ratified human rights treaty in the world (UNICEF, 2007) ^[13]. Although Zambia signed the Convention on September 30, 1990 and ratified it on December 6, 1991 without any reservations, it seems teachers are not conversant with the CRC due to the prevalent violation of children's rights in schools. Hathaway (2007) ^[9] argues that countries with poor human rights records appear to ratify treaties at a higher rate than those with better records. Hathaway (Ibid) adds that probably because there is no international police force for human rights nor system of fining a state or imposing any other penalty as

recommendations of the treaty's bodies. Baird (2009) ^[2] also indicates that the implementation of recommendations of the convention depends on the good will of the state for their implementation. Zambia has ratified most of the international and regional treaties that protect the right to education, but children's rights in the education system remain a challenge even though children's rights are contained in the CRC. Notwithstanding the importance of children's rights, there seem to be initial by the Zambian government to undertake systematic awareness training of the professional groups, children or parents on the CRC (Children's Rights Organisation, 2008). In the light of human rights context, do teachers in Zambia understand rights, particularly children's rights? Chigunta (2005) ^[4] noted that despite Zambia, having ratified several human rights treaties such as the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC, 1989), African Charter on the Rights and Welfare of the Child (ACRWC, 1991), Convention on the Rights for Persons with Disabilities (CRPD) among other protocols the subject of human rights has not been integrated in school curriculum of the country education system.

1.2 Research objectives

1. Explore teachers understanding of children's rights in the context of the Convention on the Rights of the Child (CRC).
2. Examine teachers' classroom practices with regards children's right.

1.3 Research questions

1. To what extent are children's rights embedded in the education system in Zambia?
2. From a teacher's perspective, how are children's right understood?

3. What interventions do teachers employ to address children rights in classrooms?

2. Literature review

2.1 Inclusion of children's rights in the curriculum

Although some schools across the globe have embedded human rights education in their curriculum, it also appears that the inclusion of a human rights component is not systematically taught in schools (Robinson, 2018) ^[18]. In order to interrogate awareness of children's right, Mutepfa and Gwanzura (2017) ^[16] conducted a study in Bindura province of Zimbabwe. The objectives of that study were: to assess the level of pupil's awareness of their rights at school, home and community as well as to examine the views of teaching on children's rights and assess the extent of integration of children's rights in the school, home and community. The numbers of participants who were involved in the study were 48 teachers and 120 pupils sampled from four schools. The data collection was done using two sets of questionnaires: one set was administered to the pupils and another set administered to teachers. The results of the study showed that awareness of participation rights among pupils was very low among both primary and secondary school pupils as only 20% of them were aware of their rights. Further, the results revealed that although pupils were being taught about their rights, there was ambiguity on the specific rights taught and the methods used to teach them.

2.2 Teachers perspective of children's rights

A study to collect baseline information on child rights issues was conducted in three provinces (Central, Copperbelt and Lusaka) of Zambia by Chigunta (2005) ^[4]. The aim of that study was to assess the feasibility and sustainability of the project entitled 'Child Rights Clubs Formation and Dissemination on the CRC and State Party Report (SPR)'. A total of 10,970 participants took part in the study of whom 6,240 were boys and 4,730 were girls. The data collection technique employed was a focus group (FGD) as the main source of information on evaluating awareness of the CRC and contents of its message, general awareness of the CRC and its message and finally respondent's awareness of the responsibilities of children. The data was also collected through in-depth interviews were the major source of information for evaluating individual respondents' rights of the child irrespective of the awareness of the CRC and its message and finally respondent's awareness of responsibilities of children.

The results of the study showed that the level of awareness and knowledge of the CRC are higher among the CRC member schools than non-CRC members. Similarly, the level of awareness and knowledge of the child rights are higher among CRC members than non-CRC members. Additionally, the study also showed that in schools where CRC clubs' activities were highly active, the levels of awareness and knowledge of the convention were higher than those where CRC activity was low. But the children seemed to know more about the rights of the child than their responsibilities. The study concluded that the Child Rights Projects had a positive impact on the awareness of and the knowledge of the right child in the school child rights operated (p.12-22).

2.3 Barriers to teaching children rights

In sub-Saharan Africa, only 64% of primary school teachers are trained and countries differ when it comes to programme duration, curriculum content, quality of field experience, practice teaching and many other aspects (ibid). Teacher education programmes may or may not include a period of supervised teaching practice or even require academic qualifications. Such qualitative differences in the training and qualifications of teachers affect instructional quality in the classroom and ultimately students' learning achievement.

2.4 Teacher and classroom practice

A recent childhood studies competence evolves at different rates across culture, life experiences circumstances and in the association with different rights (Lansdown, 2005) ^[14]. Article 12, the central Article of the CRC, details the right of participation, also reflects the importance of the evolving capacity of children which states that children should be involved in participation in matters affecting them; however, in accordance with other rights such as Article 5, the final decision is made by adults.

3. Methodology

In the current research, a qualitative method was adopted.

3.1 Sample of the study

A total of six (6) participants (teachers) were purposively selected at a primary school in Kitwe district of Zambia.

3.2 Instruments of data collection

The researcher used interview schedule to collect the data for this study via a skype link. The interviews were transcribed and coded to categorise key themes and identify patterns.

4. Data analysis and Discussion

For the purpose of analysis and discussion, audio and video contents were recorded and categorised as R1, R2, R3, R4, R5 and R6 while upholding participants' confidentiality.

4.1 Teachers' understanding of the concept of 'rights'

On the understanding of the concept of rights, R4, explained that:

'Here in Zambia, every child has got the rights to education, meaning every child should be given a chance to go school. And that is why education here at primary is free' She further said: *'...another one [example of right] is whereby every child is entitled to shelter.'*

On the other hand, the interpretation of 'rights', according to R5 was also similar to all the other respondents. For example, she stated that:

'... the rights can be described as what people are supposed to have...for instance people have rights to education, rights to health, right to good food or shelter'.

However, R1 described the word "right" in the following way:

'I think rights are basic necessities for the general survival of the of the child or a human being...'

Moreover, regarding the question of whether children have

rights, again all the respondents seemed to support that view. For instance, R2 expressed that 'they [children] have a right, they have a right to be listen [sic] to when they express themselves'.

The respondents' citing of the right to education as an example of a 'right' in general, seems to be supported literature which indicates that the right to education is comprehensively accepted articulation of the school's rights across the globe (Beiter, 2006; Lundy, 2012) ^[3, 15].

4.2 Classroom management through corporal punishment

On the issue of classroom management, R2 mentioned that 'children should be treated with respect; they have the feelings and they also get heard. In order to respect children's views, she emphasised of the need to 'remind the children that they are very important, they need to be respected as human beings'

Similar sentiments of respect for children were also expressed by R3 who indicated that:

'when I am not sure on what I am teaching they [children] have the right to tell me like, can you repeat what you have taught, we are not clear?' and added: *'Or it maybe I am teaching something which they are not happy with, they have the rights [sic] to ask me questions, and they have rights to correct me when they see that I have made mistake. As human being we all make mistake'.*

In addition, R3 stressed that:

'They [children] have the right to say we don't like your teaching, yes they can tell me or even if I beat them, they have the rights to say you have no rights to beat us...'

This approach is consistent with research by Howe and Covell (2005) ^[10] who found that democratic pedagogies involving classroom management practices and learning process which are viewed as student centred, active and experimental, and commonly draw on cooperative learning strategies.

On the other hand, the teachers who had contrary views with regards to how children should be treated justified their use of corporal punishment on the grounds that children were abusing their rights. For instance, R6 indicated that:

'somehow, anyway, there are those rights which are ok, but for the one for corporal punishment somehow, again for these rights like the right to education, shelter, health those political rights and all those are ok'.

Again, this respondent commented further that:

'the way the children are behaving, especially from the time the corporal punishment was removed, it has been so hard...we got so many cases of children being unruly...'

R5 shared the same concerns as those expressed by R6 above. According to her:

'the difficulties are that with these human rights, as a teacher you're not supposed to beat a child. Now, because of those rights, these learners have become somehow unruly...'

She justified her views by stating that:

'...it really helped the time we were growing up; but us the time we were growing up; we would fear, not just the way the children are behaving nowadays, they are abusing these rights.'

This respondent justified her response that:

'yes, they are abusing the rights... as I said earlier, a child would walk out from class to say no you shouldn't beat me or you shouldn't punish me to say water the flower bed, I

am going home. That is unruly behaviour, the child should listen to what you are telling him or her...'

In the case of R2, she mentioned that children should be made to do manual work such as watering the garden as a form of corporal punishment: *'Watering the garden in a container can't be corporal punishment for the child, it is the responsibility'*. She defended her response by saying that,

'You talk to the child in length, you tell the child what his responsibilities are. ...when we teach them about rights, we also teach them about responsibilities...we will teach them about their rights and their responsibilities. They need to obey when big people are telling them good things and that is why we even elaborate on the good and the bad things.'

However, R2 took a different view of punishment:

'...sometimes learners...are being beaten whenever, maybe, they do something wrong. Instead of the teacher to educate them, sometimes they are punished, to do, for example...they are taken outside to go and work when maybe they have made some mistakes, they haven't written their work of which they are not supposed to do that as a teachers'

However, evidence of research has also shown a high number of negative perceptions of child rights among teachers (Iroegbu, 2015; Jerome *et al*, 2015) ^[12, 13]. This resistance seems to stem from teachers' traditional concerns that children's knowledge of their rights may weaken their authority. Covell and Howe (2005) ^[10] argue that there are misconceptions among some educators that if children are made aware of their rights, there will be chaos in their classrooms and teachers will lose their position of dominance.

4.3. Integrating children's rights in the curriculum

With respect to integrating children's rights in the curriculum all the respondents seemed to suggest that they are up to date with the teaching of children rights to learners: *'it is incorporated in such a way that they have included it in the curriculum such that we should teach them in certain topics'* (R5). Another respondent, R6 mentioned that:

'The curriculum has been written in where all these rights have been included Because we are starting from the foundations, just as these children are growing up, they will be able to know all their rights...they will be able to implement some of the things that they are learning'.

In the current study, teachers said that they used different approaches in the way they teach about children about their rights in the classrooms. For example, R2 stated that:

'I make sure that I teach on the importance of their rights and do give them their rights ... they have the right to be listened to when they express themselves'.

The responses which were expressed by R2 correspond with those that were expressed by R3 who mentioned that:

'I am supposed to tell the learners what rights to them is...I can also talk about their rights when I am teaching even other subjects as I am starting, that can be an introduction thing so that learners can know about their rights'.

4.4 Teachers limited knowledge about the CRC

Regarding teacher's knowledge of the convention, R1 stated that: *'It is the statutory instrument that has been put in place to safeguard the lives of the children'*. The above respondent also highlighted the reasons the convention was established: *'...they put interventions that can help the*

children to better their society'.

The responses expressed by R3 on her understanding of the convention is that:

'...when you teach them [children] about their rights they will be able to remind each other on the rights...and then they will be able to tell other; those who don't know about their rights; like they will convey the message to the other people who don't know about their rights...'

However, R3 admitted that: *'The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child...with that one I am not familiar...'*

This aspect tends to agree with research conducted in Nigeria by Iroegbu (2015) ^[12] which recommended that teacher training should include all aspect of children's right. Article 42 of the CRC obliges all UN-member States to make the Convention widely known to all citizens; this would conceivably include students and educators within public and private schools, colleges and universities as well as within intergovernmental departments.

5. Conclusion, Findings and Recommendations

5.1 Conclusion

Teachers had some understanding of children's rights, but the degree to which they understood these rights still remains a mystery. At the mentioning of the word rights the teachers associated it to "right to education". This gave the impression that "right" is "education" and vice versa yet education is just one of the rights from body of rights which children are privileged to. Despite being aware that corporal punishment has been outlawed in Zambia, some teachers are still supporting it. These respondents mentioned that because some children were very unruly, corporal punishment was the means of they instilled discipline in the children. Therefore, teachers' understanding of the children's rights is not connected to the CRC or other human right framework.

5.2 Findings

1. Children's rights are not embedded in the education system in Zambia.
2. The teachers teach children's rights in a fragmented manner.
3. Teachers interpretation of children's rights is not connected to any human rights charter such as the CRC or ACRWC, 1991.
4. Due to different understanding of children's rights, some teachers applied corporal punishment to children in their classroom which demonstrated that teachers lacked respect for human rights.
5. Some teachers believe that in order to discipline children in their classrooms they use corporal punishment.
6. The current study established that teachers supported children beyond the confines of their classroom.
7. Lack of knowledge on the CRC makes it difficult for some teachers to support the rights of the children.

5.3 Recommendations

1. In order to promote a human right culture in schools, there is need for the school management to adopt a human right framework such as the CRC which would guide both the teachers and pupils on the right approach.
2. Teacher can adapt and localise the curriculum in their

teaching. This would accord them an opportunity conduct action research and learn more about children's rights.

3. By adopting the CRC as an instrument for teaching rights, there will be a common understanding and practice about rights by teachers and pupils

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