

Effects of children's rights on school value systems: a case study of Nyamuzuwe cluster

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Abstract

This study sought to find out the effects of children's rights on school value system. The study used a combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods. Fifty five respondents comprising of 30 children, 15 teachers, 6 parents and 4 heads of departments were used as research subjects. The research used questionnaires and interviews as research instruments. The major findings were that most of the children, parents and some teachers do not know the Convention on the Rights of Child document and only know rights of children from different sources. The school values pave way for children to claim certain rights. The right to be heard can be claimed if children are having Junior School Development Committee at their schools. The study recommends that curriculum designers should include children's rights with African cultural values. It is also important to provide children with adequate relevant information regarding children's rights. There is also need for mass media on the importance of school discipline so as to alleviate the effects of rights on school value system.

Key words: children, rights, school, value systems, discipline

1. Introduction and background to the study

Children's rights listed in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCRC) are defined, from a UN perspective, as a set of universal entitlements for every child below the age of 18. The UNCRC grants children a comprehensive set of economic, social, cultural, civil and political rights. The Convention is legally binding and obliges governments to respect, protect and fulfil children's rights through their policies. These policies are given to institutions that deal with children by their respective governments.

Children, especially in sub-Saharan Africa, were exposed to extraordinarily harsh living conditions. They had no food to eat, and little or no health support, their lives claimed tragically by infant and child mortality. Older children were being trafficked and were working as migrant child labour, usually away from their homes. Those who remain in their communities and are at work were also victims of market forces and lacked access to state services and protective schemes (Haar, 2004). There were also various cultural practices that were violating the human rights. For example in Zimbabwe the traditional practice of paying for 'ngozi' is a gross violation of the rights of a child and. 'Ngozi' is the pledging of girls, sometimes from infancy as payments for crimes committed by male members of the family. This takes away freedom of choice.

It is against this background that human rights have been discussed since the 17th century. It was though until the 19th and 20th centuries that the rights of children began to be considered. Initially, discussions of children's rights tended primarily to be focused more on protection rights than any concept that children were entitled to their own rights as equal citizens of the world.

Although the rights of children were implicitly included, many argued that the special needs of children justified an additional separate document. The United Nation Human Rights Commission group then started to work on the CRC. It was then adopted by the United Nations General Assembly in 1989. This later led to the formation of the United Nation International Children Emergency Fund (UNICEF), which established a research centre to support its advocacy for children worldwide. The prime objectives of the Office of Research are to improve international understanding of issues relating to children's rights and to help facilitate full implementation of the CRC in developing and middle-income countries, in which Zimbabwe is included.

In relation to the effects of the CRC on African cultural values, social theorists like Haar (2004) explained that African society have entered an era where these children's rights are consumed globally. Human cultural values or ideas are all integrated across the globe. And this according to Johnny (2006), African cultures are now witnessing the effects of the CRC since they have an enormous challenge on their cultural values. Some of the rights are not congenial to African context and have rather helped to erode or reduce African cultural values to a lower level. Children are now exhibiting certain behaviours based on the knowledge and information about the CRC. For example children are now resorting to indecent dressing, drug abuse, violent demonstrations etc. These behaviours are done in the name of freedom of association and expression and yet in African cultures and school cultures such behaviours are inappropriate.

The African cultural values that include sense of community life, good human relations, hospitality and sense of respect for authority are the ideas a specific culture has about what is good, right, fair and just. These values must be passed from generation to the next. The members of a culture must therefore want to conform to the values and obey the rules. Children should learn these values from their parents, teachers, peers and any others whose values and attitudes take place in the context of their organisational culture. If internalisation and

socialisation fail to produce conformity some form of “social control” is needed in the form of ostracism, fines and punishments. Sociologist also noted that culture may have conflicting values due to an inconsistency between people’s actions and their professed values. In real culture, like the school setting, the values must actually be followed by the children and in ideal culture, in the case of CRC, the values are that society professes to believe.

It must be noted that cultural values can definitely change but not often in one’s life time. Some cultural traditions are so firm that they never change even though their practice may be archaic and seem irrelevant to the changing times. This is true in the more rural and community-based cultures. But there are values where they may be a gradual change in progress, like attitudes towards the right of children where children’s attitudes and perceptions are shaped.

With regard to the problems being assumed to be encountered by the coming of children’s rights, scholars such as Freeman (1998) have articulated the need to merge child right discourse and sociological research in the area of child studies. In particular, sociological arguments in relation to the social construction of childhood provide a great deal of clarity in unravelling some of the assumptions that people have about the nature of children. Such research is pivotal for taking the child rights debate forward, especially in relation to the right of children to participate in the decision-making process. This will allow us to determine the extent to which autonomy could be justified within the context of children’s participation at school.

It is in view of these prevailing situations that this study is designed to find out the effects of children’s rights on school value systems. Since the Government of Zimbabwe has made it a requirement among schools to teach children’s rights and even to the extent of coming up with textbooks for the purpose.

2. Research objectives

The study aimed to establish the following objectives:

- define children’s rights and school value systems;
- establish what children’s and school value system are in practice;
- asses factors that support or deter child rights on school value systems; and
- analyse the extent to which children’s rights affect school value systems.

3. Significance of the study

The findings of this study will inform educators the school practices that are often overlooking the ability of children to engage in autonomous reflections. Educational institutions will have to harmonise their policies with the participatory principle embodied in the CRC. The study will also benefit stakeholders in education or UNICEF to realise the need for governments to carefully plan and craft policies that are intended to benefit children that are caught in the midst of crisis situation. The study will create the platform for necessary workshops, staff development and training for the education sector in the implementation of children’s rights and also how to involve children in the development of the school. Students from the University will use the results obtained from this research to further their knowledge and understanding on the relationship between children’s rights and school values. The success and acceptance of this research will assist in boosting the competitiveness of the academic institution.

4. Theoretical Framework

This research is highly embedded within the Open Systems Theory by Bastedo (2004). For Bastedo, Open Systems Theory refers to the concept that organizations are strongly influenced by the environment. The environment consists of other organizations that exert various forces of economic, political, or social nature. According to Bastedo (2004), the environment also provides key resources that sustain the organization and lead to change survival. Most modern and recent theories of organizations use the open systems theory. As a result, open systems theory comes in many situations. For example, institutional theorists see organizations as a means by which the societal values and beliefs are included in organizational structure and expressed in organizational change. Resource dependency theorists see the organization as adapting to the environment as dictated by its resource providers. Although there is a great variety and perspectives provided by open systems theories, they agree on the same notion that an organization’s survival is dependent upon its relationship with the environment.

In this case, open systems theory has profoundly altered how schools are understood as organizations and demands placed upon educational leaders. Treating schools as if they are independent of the environment would lead to wide misconceptions of the driving factors behind organizational change. Studies show that schools benefit from a strongly open systems approach to understanding environment demands and the resulting adaptation in school policy and its implementation.

This open systems theory provides important analytical insights into the relationship between children’s rights and the school value systems. The concept of open system allows children to be viewed as capable actors who act rationally and respond swiftly to the dictates of the environment. In this research the open systems

theory is important in that it places emphasis on the fact that children are not passive and helpless pawns but are competent agents. The assumption that many people have is that children who are exposed to their rights will not respect adult authority. True as it may sound but some children if they are consulted and given the opportunity to speak and listened to will contribute to productive activities at their schools.

5. Overview of children's rights and school value systems

The adoption of the UNCRO in 1989, Article 12 – the provision that children have a right to express their views and have them taken seriously in accordance with their age and maturity – has proved one of the most challenging to implement. Although understanding of childhood and attitudes towards children differs across cultures, the experience of the CRO has been that the reason for excluding children from participation in matters that affect them are remarkably consistent across different parts of the world. Children lack competency, they lack knowledge and judgement, involving them in decisions is to place too heavy a burden on them. Parents know what is best for their children, giving children a voice will lead to excessive demands, bad behaviour, disrespect of elders and participation will also expose children to risk of harm. However these concerns are not borne out of the evidence. Experience shows that children, even very young, given the time and opportunity can demonstrate not only that they have views, experiences and perspectives to express, but that their expression can contribute positively to decisions that affect the realization of their rights and well-being.

Article 12 is important as a fundamental right. It is a measure of our children's dignity that they are able to be involved in decisions that affect them. It is also a means through which other rights are realized. Policy-makers cannot identify the barriers to fulfilling children's rights if they do not hear from children about the existence and nature of those barriers.

According to Johnny (2006), while human rights advocates widely agree that providing children with greater opportunities to participate is a more ethical way of treating children, their participation in schools is still lacking behind. For example, in the Canadian context scholars such as Howe and Covell (2000) have found that schools possess few platforms that allows children to contribute to the decision- making process. Although it is true that some educational institutions provide students councils that allow children to learn about democratic participation these councils are instituted at varying degrees. For example, in Zimbabwean schools there are having Junior School Development Committees and councilors but these bodies are not provided with opportunities to make substantive decisions about the school (cited in Johnny, 2006). This was also in agreement with Sudbury Valley School (1970) who cited that there are similar problems in America as students are provided with very little rights in their schools; their voices are usually left out on issues regarding curriculum and school rules and regulations are provided to them without opportunities for them to debate. Hart (cited in Johnny, 2006) had a view that the most fundamental reason seems to be that, as primary socializing instrument of the state, schools are concerned with maintaining order and stability. And this is generally understood to mean preserving their power and authority.

The right to be heard applies to every aspect of a child's life, for example, at home, in health, in school, communities and national policy making. However, although much progress has been made in many countries, Zimbabwe included, the right to be heard remains unrealized. Most organizations like schools, they do have their core values which children must observe. These school values sometimes will conflict with children's perception of their rights.

6. School value system

Schools are mandated to create an effective school culture that promotes improved learning for all children. They must first identify a set of core values and beliefs about learning that will function as explicit fundamental commitments to the students and the community. With these values, beliefs and learning expectations, it can take steps to ensure they are actively reflected in the culture of the school and drive curriculum, instruction and assessment practices in every classroom. The school can also use the values to guide the school policies, procedures, decisions and resource allocations. From time to time, the school can regularly review and revise its values, beliefs and learning expectations based on research, multiple data sources as well as district and other school priorities.

A school's values and beliefs about learning can be embedded in a "mission statement". This narrative statement must be a set of challenging and measurable learning expectations which address academic, social and civic competencies. The statement must also include the school's shared beliefs and values about learning. These beliefs should be a result of thoughtful conversations about the direction of the entire school community wishes to pursue values that drive towards that direction. To ensure that the narrative reflects the beliefs of the larger community, it should be developed in a collaborative dynamic and inclusive process of administrators, teachers, students and parents who review research, multiple data sources, as well as community priorities that are pertinent in determining the school's future direction.

The process of having values outlined above offers a way for the practical application of values in the

learning and educational context to become a living reality through the participation of learners in the formation, identification and internalization of values.

7. Implications of school values

Ultimately, the ownership and decision of a value lies with the learner. Values cannot be forced, even if conveyed with good intentions. No real integration or internalization of a value can be achieved unless the child / learner desire or agrees with the said value. Educators may impose their values and may succeed in making the children articulate them, but this does not stop the learners from living out their own values when they are out of the learning environment. According to Haar (2004), to engage in valuing requires the educator to learn to respect others, in the same manner that one expects to be respected in return. As this climate of respect exists, the learners also begin to adopt a disposition of tolerance towards each other.

In the school value system the educator is attuned to the process of learning, at the same time sensitive to opportunities for teaching which result from the meaningful interaction between the educator and the learner and also the learners themselves. The learners will be more able to live consciously and responsibly. With this approach the learners become more critical and independent-minded, more attuned with their inner self and empowered to do something about their conditions rather than blame outside forces. Therefore, values are developed not by forcing children but children themselves hold the right to their own choices in life.

8. Interpretation of children's rights

Interpretation of children's rights has been predicted on acting in the child's best interests, on children's competence and capacity and on protecting for the rights-holder in the future. One way to define a right is to identify the interest that rights protect (Eekelaar, 1992). He further explained that this definition suggest that the child is a rights holder, and the adult should be the executor of these rights. Freeman (1998) has the same view when he pointed out that, the child is regarded as a citizen entitled to rights but not necessarily capable of exercising their rights, for example, participate in decisions that affect them in the same way as adults. For a child to enrol at an institution, it is a decision made by the adult in a child's life. Because of the age of the child, the adults are responsible for acting in the child's best interests.

Archard (1993: 58) had the same view when he said that the literature on children's rights centres on perceptions of children's capacity or incapacity to decide for themselves. On research which was done on the rights of children, it poses the question: what would the child want if he/she was mature enough to decide for him or herself? It was found out that, children are dependent on adults to exercise or claim some rights on their behalf. Simply put, the adult assumes responsibility for protecting the child's rights because the child is not yet considered competent to exercise these rights.

Critics of the above interpretation, such as Taylor, Smith and Nairn (2001: 139) argue that adults will not know what is of most concern to children in reaction to their rights, unless they make themselves aware of children's views and yet parents and teachers argue that because they know their children on a daily basis, they are in the best position to judge what is in the best interest of the child.

The CRC also advocate for participation rights of the child. This is embedded into the choice theory. Thus, according to protagonists of the choice theory, a person cannot be deemed to be a rights holder unless they are able to choose whether or not to waive their rights (Haar: 2004). This rationale has implications for the adults in children's lives because children are often unable to claim these rights for themselves. The choice theory depends on systems being in place and on adults' capacity firstly to recognize children's rights to be informed of choices that influence their lives and secondly, to understand children's emerging capabilities to exercise their right to choose. This however is problematic because by definition choice involves two or more parties, and in this case, the affected parties are likely to be adults and children. A perception that children's rights to choose will undermine adult authority and school values is not uncommon.

However, some researchers found out that, participation contributes to personal development. The realization of the right to be heard and to have views given due weight promotes capacities of children. According to Haar (2004), there is growing evidence that routinely taking children's views and experiences into account, within the family, at school and in other setting, helps develop children's self esteem, cognitive abilities, social skills and respect for others. Through participation children, acquire skills, build competence, extend aspirations and gain confidence.

The findings by Kirby and Bryson (2005), also confirmed that participation of children leads to better decision-making and outcomes. The argument is that, adults do not always have sufficient insight into children's lives to be able to make informed and effective decisions on policies and programmes designed for children. Children have knowledge about their lives, needs and concerns, together with ideas and views which derive from their direct experience.

9. Research Methodology

In this study both quantitative and qualitative research methods were used. Qualitative methods enable researchers to describe what people see. Quantitative methods help in analysing quantitative data in form of tables and in figures.

Stratified random sampling was used for selecting participants. The approach permitted the researchers to identify sub-groups within the study population to come up with a sample that reflected the sub-groups by randomly choosing participants from each stratum. In this research the groups are the students, teachers and parents, heads of schools and heads of civic organisations. The study population was thus grouped as follows: 30- students, 20- teachers and 3- heads, 6-parents and a representative from PLAN International Zimbabwe.

In this study questionnaires and interviews were used to collect data.

10. Findings

10.1 Children's Impressions

Figure 1: Analysis of Gender and Age of Children's Responses

N = 30

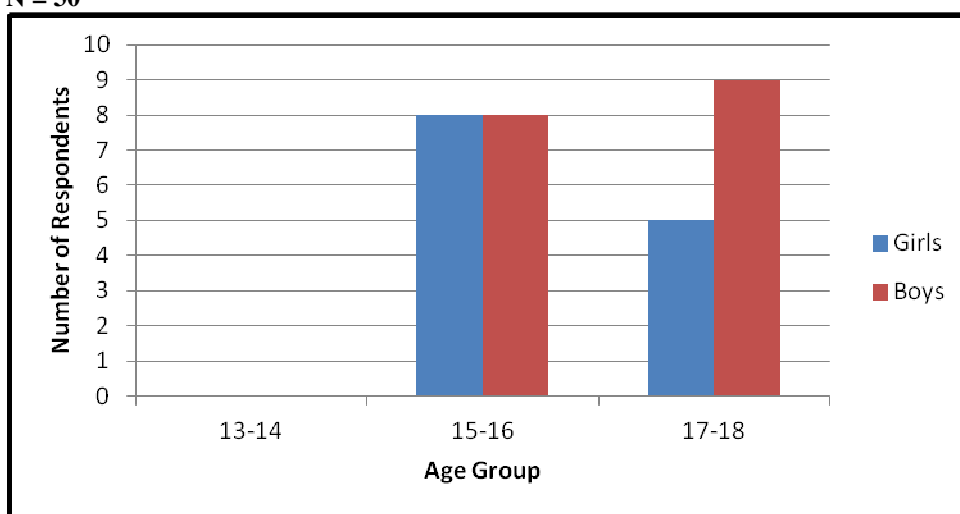


Figure 1 shows that there was no child who was in the 13-14 age group. Most of the children were selected from the 15-16 and 17- 18 age groups. The figure also shows that there are more boys than girls in the age groups selected.

Figure 2 shows that Form 3 and Form 4 contributed 50% each to those who participated. This guaranteed the researcher that all the participants were literate with at least Form 3 as the lowest academic level and hence they were able to give correct and accurate data that yields true results.

Figure 2: Educational level

N = 30

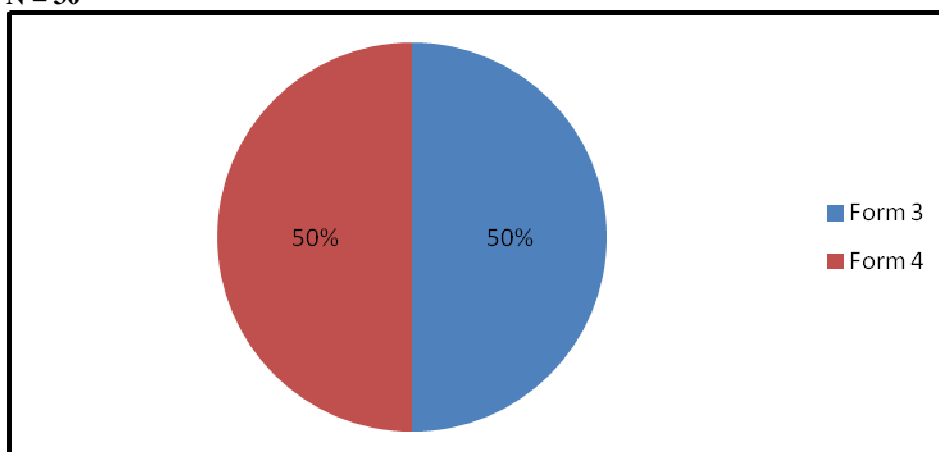


Table 1 shows that most of the children know their rights. Above 90% of the children managed to indicate the rights contained in the CRC document: the right to participation, protection and the right to education.

Table 1: Children’s Knowledge about Rights
N = 30

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	28	93.3
No	2	6.7
Total	30	100

Figure 3 shows that most of the children wanted both teachers and parents to give them more information on their rights.

Figure 3: Adults chosen by children to give more information on rights
N = 30

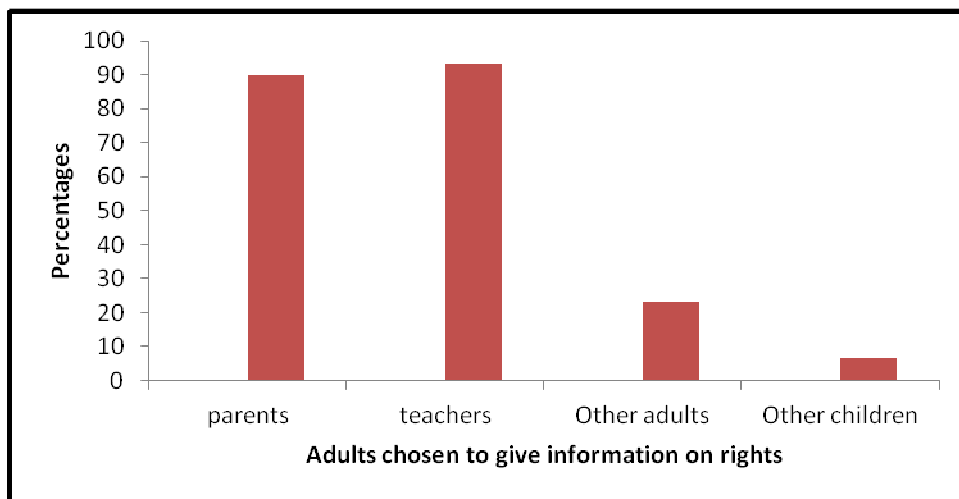


Table 2 shows the distribution of children’s responses to what they regarded as school values. The majority regarded obedience, time conscious and perseverance as as important school values.

Table 2: School Values
N = 30

School Value	Number	Percentage (%)
Obedience	29	96.7
Forming relationships	11	36.7
Time conscious	23	76.7
Perseverance	23	76.7
Absenteeism	0	0

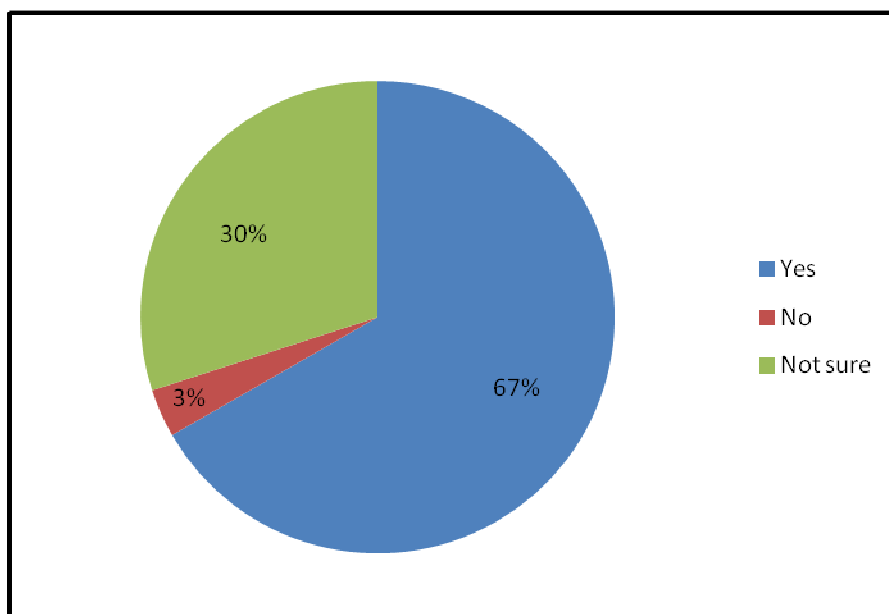
Table 3 shows distribution of answers to the question on children’s involvement in decision making processes in their school. The majority were of the view that their views were respected and taken seriously in their school decision making processes. Thus, children are involved on matters relating to them in their schools decision making. The 30% of students who don’t know, whether their views are taken into account, may seem to suggest that there is no proper feedback given to children after their involvement.

Table 3: Children’s views on their involvement in school matters decision making
 N = 30

Responses	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	20	66.7
No	1	3.3
I don’t know	9	30.0
Total	30	100

The pie chart below shows that 67% of the children will tell other people if they are mistreated. This means that a greater number of children will seek the right to protection in some cases to do with their welfare. Only 30% of the children are not sure of what action to take if they feel that they have been treated unfairly. The results seem to suggest that children might not know whether to bring issues from home to school or from school to their parents.

Figure 4: Children’s views on their right to freedom of expression
 N = 30



10.2 Teachers and Parents’ Impressions

Table 4: Category of respondents
 N = 21

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
Teacher	15	71.4
Parents	6	28.6
Total	21	100

The majority of parents and teachers were aware of the protective rights of children (see Table 5).

Table 5: Knowledge on Protective rights of children

N = 21

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	17	80.9
No	4	19.1
Total	21	100

Very few teachers and parents were aware of the availability of the CRC document (see Table 6).

Table 6: Teachers and Parents' Knowledge of the CRC Document

N =21

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
Yes	7	33.3
No	14	66.7
Total	21	100

The study established that teachers and parents help children to understand their rights and also observe the teaching rights in schools (see Table 7).

Table 7: Teachers and parents' perception on the rights of children in Schools.

N = 21:

Questions on children's rights	Number	Percentage (%)
Do you help your children to understand that they have rights?	20	95.2
Do you think that the rights of children at school are respected?	17	81
Do you think the rights of children should be taught in schools?	20	95.2
Do you respect the opinion of your children?	12	57.1

All the sampled teachers and parents indicated that the child will lose if his/her rights are not respected (see Table 8). The results reveal that parents and the community as whole will not benefit.

Table 8: The benefits/loses when children's rights are not respected

N = 21

Response	Number	Percentage (%)
Child gains	0	0
Child loses	21	21
Total	21	100

10.3 Interview for heads of department

The interviews conducted on the heads of departments indicated that schools do observe the rights of children in their respective schools. One school rated the current state of children's rights to be slightly above 50% awareness.

These interviews reveal that the ministry of primary and secondary education do include the teaching of children's rights in schools. The ministry itself has a policy on discipline in schools under circular minute P.35 of

1993, which is on suspension, exclusion and corporal punishment on school children. This is an indication that rights of children are taken into consideration. The civic organisations also confirmed that they work together with the ministry in all their child rights campaigns. However one head said that the teaching of rights is not properly explained in the school curriculum.

Heads of schools indicated that in their schools they are aware of children's rights. Head of school A says "It is highly informed". She said that enforcement is put on the health of children, where the school have enough toilets and detergents for the toilets and floors.

The interviews also reveal that schools take children's views into consideration through their Junior SDC which always work with the senior SDC. At school B, children's views or opinions are communicated through the prefect body.

All the heads revealed that teachers fairly understand children's rights. The heads indicated that they have some teachers who cater for the welfare of children. One school has a child protection committee made up of teachers. This committee work in collaboration with civic organisations.

Of interest from the interviews is that, teachers are under increasing pressure from parents in the face of rising and extraordinary incidents of indiscipline on the part of children. This is an indication that teachers will end up resorting to corporal punishment or other equally harsh disciplinary measures as a means of enforcing discipline so as to maintain the school values.

All the interviewees indicated that the right to education is now being realised. They revealed that most of the communities now know that it is illegal not to send a child to school but they are not aware of any cases where a parent has been arrested for dropping a child out of school.

Civic organisations indicated that the right to protection is an area which has progressed. They revealed that they have files of cases of child abuse which they are dealing with together with the police. The cases of abuse are reported by schools and some by parents.

One head indicated that the right of the mentally and physically challenged are not being fulfilled. The reasons cited are that there are no qualified teachers for such children. The schools are also supposed to be child-friendly, schools which cater for the needs of all children, but they still lack resources for that purpose.

Children's issues are being heard at school and at national level. At schools this is done through the class teachers and the junior SDC and at national level, children now have parliamentarians and presidential representatives. This is an indication that children are given with a platform to air their views.

The civic organisations are also carrying out awareness campaigns on children's rights. These are followed by training and workshops with community leaders, parents and teachers.

There are, however, areas where children's rights are ignored or underplayed. Of particular concern is the practice of some churches which discourage their members from sending their children to school and force children into early marriages.

One head also indicated that some rights are underplayed due to ignorance mostly by parents. There are indications that some children do not attend all lessons because of petty issues, for example a child may be asked to go to the dip tank on a school day, which deprives the child to the right to education.

All the heads of schools concurred that the rights of children should be taught in schools from primary level in their lessons. This calls for the provision of books on the rights of children. The results indicate that there must be the involvement of all stakeholders, that is, parents, teachers, children and the communities. Civic organisations advocated for more awareness campaigns, training and workshops on children's rights.

11. Conclusions and recommendations

The study established that:

- teachers and parents support the incorporation of children's rights into the school system;
- a lot of people are not aware of all the children's rights contained in CRC document and a lot of them do not know the document itself;
- it is the responsibility of both parents and teachers to teach children cultural values, life skills and guidance and counselling at home and school;
- the school has the most influence on shaping people's understanding of children;
- children are aware of the school values and this knowledge can actually pave way for children to claim their rights; and
- some cultures still believe in old practices of paying for 'ngozi' which is a violation of the rights of the child;

Overall this study established that parents and teachers endorsed the teaching of children's rights in schools and confirmed that the rights of children are being taught in schools. It was seen however that there are gaps that need to be filled. The study thus recommends the following:

- the resources that promote the teaching of children's rights need to be improved and teachers, parents and children themselves must be involved to a greater extent in the awareness of children's rights;
- governments, curriculum designers and educationists should implement a comprehensive curriculum with children's rights but it should inculcate African cultural values as well as discourage other values that are not in consonance with the African way of life;
- policy makers, teachers and parents should provide children with adequate relevant information regarding children's rights;
- the government should assist schools and their SDCs to build child-friendly schools so as to cater for the needs of all children; and
- there is need for mass media to keep enlightening teachers, parents and children themselves on the importance of school discipline. This is necessary to eradicate or at least alleviate the effects of rights on school value system.

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