



Building Democratically Active Citizens Through The Prefectship System in Botswana Schools

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Abstract

The goal of education in countries which regard themselves as democracies is to help develop citizens who can actively participate in the democratic process. Today, more than ever before, schools face the challenge of aligning their philosophies to the democratic national principles of the nation-state in order to produce citizens who are active in the democratic process. Therefore, this study was undertaken to explore the relationship between democracy and education by investigating the efficiency of the prefectship system (student leadership system where students choose their leaders) in Botswana Secondary Schools.

Keywords: Prefectship system, democracy, education, Botswana, democratically active citizens, voter apathy, Student Representative Council (SRC)

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Building Democratically Active Citizens Through The Prefectship System in Botswana Schools

This was a study on the prefectship system in the Botswana's Junior Secondary schools and how it contributes towards the development of democratically active citizens. The study was influenced by the issue of voter apathy in our general elections as well as the issue of student leadership in schools. According to the Independent Electoral Commission (IEC) (2002), youth are not interested in voting during national elections. They do not give the elections or political participation the seriousness it deserves. This therefore raises the feeling that this might be due to the fact that youth are not given enough exposure to be involved in the democratic process at a tender age. As a matter of fact, they are not given the chance to elect representatives or their leaders during their schooling period which ultimately impacts their participation in the democratic process. Denying students a platform for political participation in schools emanates from the belief that students are children who within the African ways of child upbringing, children are only *supposed to seen and not heard*. This is definitely an issue that causes concern because consequently it could escalate the problem of voter apathy in the nation-state.

The study therefore sought to investigate whether voter apathy among youth is directly linked to the process of electing prefects in Botswana secondary schools or not. Ideally, for students' voices to be heard by school authorities, they have to be represented by their Student Representative Council (SRC) or prefects. The difference between the two is that prefects are students charged with the responsibility of helping the administration to maintain a friendly and orderly atmosphere amongst the students and in the school in general through guiding and supervising other students. They are found mostly in secondary schools. The Student Representative Council (SRC) is a more radical body of representatives tasked with the responsibility of representing the interests of the students in tertiary institutions such as colleges

and universities. The body is elected by students through the ballot. In all these settings, the representatives are supposed to come into these positions by virtue of being chosen by other students through the ballot and looking at certain qualities in their possession such as the ability to communicate, intelligence, competence and control among others.

Prefectship System and Democratic Engagement

Participatory citizenship demands every member of the community to participate in self governance which ultimately could lead to the building of a strong democracy (Barber, 1989 in McKenna, 2000:15).

Election of prefects is therefore supposed to make students have a feeling of being part of the school organization as well as being exposed to the functions of the democratic process through participation. Under such circumstances, it could be argued that the prefectship system can be an ideal mechanism of developing democratically active citizens who do not only hear about democracy but also live it. The situation at hand in Botswana secondary schools is that nomination of such students is done by teachers without the input from students. In instances where students are given the chance to submit names of colleagues who they wish to be prefects, teachers usually screen those names and reject those that they think do not possess the right qualifications. This violates the operations of a true democracy and this is certainly a matter that needs attention. Such a scenario contributes towards the development of apathetic citizens since they do not partake directly in the ultimate election of their leaders. Democracy is about participation.

Jotia (2008) indicates that the scenario in Botswana schools is that the prefects are not representatives of the student body. The student body does not have a last say on who should become their leader. The administration has absolute power to refuse or accept a student leader

despite the fact that the student body might be having confidence in that individual (p.152). Such practice is detrimental to the production of rational and democratic leaders and suppresses the students' potential to develop into leaders as well as partaking in the national political process. In a sense, under such circumstances, prefects become more of police officers than functionally active democrats representing the student body. Jotia (2008) further contends:

The prefectship system in place violates democratic practice and is toothless since the students are not involved in the running of the affairs of the institution other than the fact that they supervise meals, studies, cleaning of school environment and reporting wrongdoers to the administration. It is for this reason that I contend that prefects are the eyes and ears of the administration but do not have any powers whatsoever. Their decision-making potential is suppressed and generally the school authorities strangle their voices and deny them full exposure to how democracy functions. (p.155)

The purpose of having student leadership is to involve the students in the running of the school organization and the consequences should be an improved discipline and helping in the building of a democratically active society. According to Thorburn & Jenkins (2003, p.37) democracy incorporates strong participatory and deliberative elements in which citizens are engaged at local and national levels in a variety of political activities and regard discourse, debate and deliberation as essential conditions for reaching common ground and arbitrating differences among people in a large multicultural society. In a strong democracy, citizens actually participate in governing themselves, if not in all matters all the time, at least in some matters at a time.

It is on the basis of the above assertions that we believe this study was crucial in that it addressed some of the key weaknesses regarding the prefectship system in schools and how it affects democratic participation. It is also hoped that this study would contribute towards finding modalities which would help prompt youth's participation in the national politics through voting.

Structure of Botswana's Education System: Junior Secondary

Soon after independence in 1966, Botswana focused on the development of a sound and robust education system that fosters the intellectual maturity of citizens so that they could develop identities which will enable them to partake actively in the evolving democratic process. Taking into account the fact that the country had just been freed from the chains of colonization, Botswana's education system at primary, secondary and tertiary levels was premised on the principle of *Education for Kagisano* (social harmony) which literally meant that the state wanted to build a society different from that of the colonizers which promoted oppression, domination, corruption, greed and socio-economic and political disparities. Therefore the education system was driven by a set of national principles (democracy, development, unity and self-reliance) and a combination of these four principles produces the national philosophy of *Kagisano* (social harmony) which embraces the concepts of social justice, interdependence and mutual assistance (National Commission on Education (NCE), 1977: 24). During the early 1990s, the government of Botswana added the fifth national principle of *botho* (humane/good personality) as a guiding principle which will help produce morally and ethically sound citizens. As such, Botswana's education system today is driven by these five national principles and the goal is to develop self-reliant, democratically active and conscious citizens who are development-oriented, morally and ethically good, as well as being able to cherish unity at the same time remaining loyal and patriotic to the state. It is an education system which promotes principles of national

development, rapid economic growth, economic independence, social justice and a desire for continued learning (Curriculum Development and Evaluation, 2002:1).

The basic education programme includes ten years of education (standard 1 through 10 or form 3) and thereafter students have two years of senior secondary school. Just to indicate Botswana's zeal to produce educated citizens, in 1985 the government embarked on a large scale programme to increase access to form 1 and increased the number of junior secondary schools from 33 in 1984 to 146 in 1991 and this enabled the enrolments in junior secondary schools to rise from 23 500 in 1984 to 52 866 in 1991 (National Commission on Education, 1993:140). As of now, there is automatic promotion from standard 7 to form 3, which means even those students who have failed standard 7 are allowed to go on to form 1 through form 3 so that they can attain the basic 10 years of education. However, those who fail to perform well at form 3 do not automatically progress to form 4.

According to Teaching Service Management (2004), an ordinary junior secondary school class size ranges from the ratio of 1:45 to a maximum of 1:50 in some extra-ordinary circumstances. Currently, the ordinary teacher at a secondary school can teach between 30-45 lessons (periods) per week, senior teachers teach 20, 25 or 30 periods per week depending on their rank of seniority. Heads of departments, deputy school heads as well as school heads are not required to teach, their duties are purely administrative. At junior secondary school, students are expected to pay P300.00 (about \$42.00) per annum. A normal school day for both boarding and day schools starts at 7:30AM and ends at 4:30PM and within that time-period both academic and extra-curricular activities are supposed to be covered. The extra-curricular activities cover *inter alia* sporting activities, clubs, societies, in-service activities, committee activities and remedial teaching (Teaching Service Management, 2004:10).

Students are provided with meals within the school in most cases and the non-teaching staff are the ones responsible for the preparation of meals. In fact, the prefects play a crucial supervisory role when it comes to meal times and in most cases they are paired with the teachers who are on duty. The idea behind the introduction of prefects in schools therefore was highly influenced by national educational philosophy-*Education for Kagisano* and the goal is that children should be able to identify with the national principles of democracy, self reliance, unity, development and *botho* at a tender age so that they can become actively engaged democrats in the future. In a sense, the introduction of the prefectship system in schools was meant to nurture the development of citizens who can participate in Botswana's democratic process. The noble goal of this system is to empower students although what we see practically in schools defeats the whole purpose of the system.

Purpose of Study

The purpose of this study was to investigate the extent to which the prefectship system in Botswana schools develop and nurture students democratically. The study also investigated why and how the schools in Botswana embark on such a system and finally the study evaluated whether the system was bringing good results for both the students and the school organization on issues of democratic engagement.

Significance of the Study

According to Lebuso (2003) the purpose of the prefectship system can be seen as two-fold. Firstly, it is to serve the school's immediate need for effective management and maintaining discipline and order and implementing the school's development projects. Secondly, it is preparing the students for future citizenship as prescribed by education systems of most countries (p.14). Given Lebuso's observations, we can deduce that the prefectship system can serve the

school organization in many ways and at the same time instilling citizenship education in the minds of the students. This study can therefore be used by the schools to improve or re-align their prefectship systems and it can also influence government to introduce civic education in schools.

The study is quite essential in that it provides a lens on the evaluation of the effectiveness of the prefectship system in so far as it produces vocal, vibrant and active leaders. Moswela (1995) states that since students are the most extensive users of the school facilities they could be a good source of information and ideas on how to improve school facilities if given the opportunity to do so (p.26). In other words, prefects should not just be used for the interest of the school authorities, but should also be used to involve students in the running as well as in infrastructural development of the school. Through their prefects, students should be able to come up with suggestions on how they want their school to be run; the involvement of students in the decision-making process can smoothen the general running of the school and take away a lot of tension. More often than not, tensions between the school administrators and students results in strikes and absolute commotion in the institution. This state of affairs can be ameliorated by putting in place an effective and efficient prefectship system.

Methodology

Research Design

This research is a multiple and instrumental case study which focused on choosing a limited number of cases to investigate the problem (Yin, 2003). Eisenhardt (1989) in Yin (2003) states that a case study is a research strategy which helps the researcher understand the dynamics which exist within a single setting and in this case our focus was in the junior secondary school environment. Since the study focused on searching for responses on the “how” or “why” questions, the case study approach was deemed favorable in order to demonstrate the results

(Yin, 2003). Yin subscribes to the notion that a case study approach in research is favorable especially when investigating contemporary issues. The issue of democratizing schools in Botswana is a contemporary issue. Our analysis of the school setting or what Geertz (2000) would call the analysis and interpretation of cultural webs, helped us get meaning in as far as the operation of the prefectship system is concerned.

In this qualitative study, we documented real events, recorded what people said (with words, gestures and tone), observed specific behaviors, studied written documents, and examined visual images (Neuman, 2007). Yin (2003) posits that case study research often includes the use of multiple methods to collect data and the use of multiple methods constitutes data triangulation which enhances the validity of the study. Glense (2010) observes that the use of multiple-data-collection methods in most cases contributes towards the trustworthiness of data under a practice called triangulation. Data from this study came from interviews with students, teachers, heads of departments, School Heads and prefects.

Research Sites

The research settings were Batanani junior secondary school in Mapoka and Ramoja junior secondary school in Ramokgwebana in the North East District of Botswana. Batanani catchment area includes Mapoka, Masukwane and Kgari villages while Ramoja catchment area covers Ramokgwebana, Moroka and Jakalasi No. 1 village. Some of these areas are between four to seven kilometers from the schools. Both the schools are “twelve streams,” that is they have four form three classes, four form two classes and four form one classes, hence the term “twelve streams.” Batanani is a boarding school while Ramoja is a day school. The schools were chosen because of their accessibility since one of them (Batanani) is located within the home village of one of the researchers. Ramoja also became ideal in the study since it is not far distanced from

Batanani and it is one of the old schools within the North Eastern region, hence its rich history was considered very essential to the study.

Selection of Participants

As earlier reflected, this was a case study which involved a detailed examination of two different settings. Bogdan & Biklen (2003) charge that under a case study researchers scout for possible places and people who may be subjects or possible sources of data and then cast a wide net in their attempt to judge the feasibility of the site or data source. One factor that determines the participation of subjects in a study is feasibility or willingness to participate in a study (Yin, 2003).

The research data was collected through interviewing and observing participants. The interviews were carried out on a population of fifty eight participants that is Heads of departments (n =6), teachers (n =10), students (n =20), prefects (n =20) and School heads (n =2). Heads of departments, School heads and teachers were interviewed individually; students and prefects were interviewed in groups. Prefects were observed on duty within stipulated times such as study time, meal hours, sports times and assembly times.

In conducting the study, we used semi-structured interviews whereby we used an interview guide and also prompted and probed the participants to get more information. Focus groups were used in this study where we discussed the topic on democratization of schools through the use of prefects. Morgan (1997) states that through focus groups, different types of data can be gained because of pronounced interaction of different people within a social group. One advantage of using focus groups in a study of this nature is that they encourage communication and provide insights into how others think and talk about the problem under investigation (Morgan, 1998).

Theoretical Framework

Democracy

The word democracy has its origins in ancient Greece. It comes from two Greek words “demos” and “kratos”. The word “demos” means people while “kratos” refers to power. So democracy therefore is people power or power by the people. Democracy is widely defined as a government of the people by the people and for the people. It is a state in which the power of government resides in or is exercised by the people and for the people. Power can be exercised by the people directly or indirectly (Unafas & ISTP, 2009). Under democratic discourses especially in schools each individual matters and should be given a platform to exercise their democratic rights by being allowed to participate in the decision-making process.

Waldron (2003) in McDonough & Feinberg (2003) observes that civic education in schools should focus on building learners who are going to develop the willingness to play a role as well as taking responsibility in all issues that affect their life. Waldron further contends that in democratic schools, a good citizen is the one who shoulders his share of the burdens of departmental administration, who is willing to advise and supervise students as well as being available to help during a time of a crisis (p.41). Given this assertions, it could be argued that schools are supposed to train students to become active role players within the school system and even beyond. Bernstein (1996) observes that within a social class, education is supposed to help promote communication, cultural and functional codes whereby consensus within a social structure is promoted rather than promoting dominance and privilege. Undemocratic schools cherish dominance and social repression which can consequently produce frustrated citizens.

Citizenship Education and Democracy in Schools

Under liberal democratic set-ups educational institutions should adopt a philosophy of education whereby citizenship education becomes part of the educational entitlement of young

people so that they can develop intellectually and reflect on the need to participate in democratic processes (McLaughlin, 2000). In the case of Botswana, the National Commission of Education (NCE) (1977) stipulates that the focus of education in the school and in the classroom should be on enabling learners to acquire knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviors that will give them a full successful life and continued personal growth, equipping them to participate effectively in a rapidly changing society (p.23). Citizenship and the teaching of democracy are so important for schools and society and all schools are supposed to expose students to democratic engagements (McLaughlin, 2000:545). Taking into account the advent of the globalization process, it is essential that citizens in every global society be equipped with knowledge, attitudes, and skills required to function not just in their cultural communities but to able to function productively even beyond their borders. Banks (2006) records that students within the global society need to acquire the knowledge and skills required to become effective citizens in the global community (p.25).

Davies (1999) contends that the fundamental principle of democracy in schools should be that sovereignty should be vested in the people. Schools therefore need to decentralize power from the center of the administration to the periphery of student community whereby the student community through their prefects could be seen to be playing a fundamental role in the running of all the affairs affecting the students directly or indirectly. According to Davies, attempts to democratize schools should embrace strategies such as developing processes of decision-making whereby constantly students and teachers can come together on the basis of the school mission to set rules, code of conduct and any other school governing policy. Political education programmes and education for citizenship should be introduced in schools so as to foster

participation as well as helping students to directly experience grassroots democratic involvement (Davies, 1999).

One troubling scenario regarding the prefectship system in Botswana schools is that although the prefects are supposed to be the official management representatives of the students, their powers and involvement in school affairs continue to dwindle. Molosiwa (2005) reflects that the “prefectorial government” in Botswana schools has never been based on democratic principles since their “election to power” is basically spearheaded by school authorities without much involvement of the student body. Sybouts & Krepel (1984) in Molosiwa (2005) make a case:

One of the fundamental assumptions of democracy is that people are competent to govern themselves and their efforts will result in organization ‘of the people, by the people and for the people.’ ...However, these tenets are not automatic but must be developed. This development comes appropriately through practice and philosophy of ‘learning by doing’ in a setting resembling that of ultimate citizenship. Participation by students in school government truly represents such a setting (p.3).

Models of Citizenship

In many academic circles within the modern nation-state, citizenship is often looked at in terms of identity or common identity thereof. Williams (2003) in McDonough & Feinberg (2003) reflects that instead of looking at citizenship from the model of citizenship-as-identity, we should move toward an idea of citizenship as membership in a community or shared fate...whereby one becomes involved with others in such a way that one’s future could be seen to be tied to the future of others (p.209). In a sense, citizenship is linked to pragmatic actions where individuals have to act, account for their actions vis-à-vis democratic principles and

relations. Much of contemporary democratic theory begins from the suppositions that meaningful democratic citizenship requires citizens to share a subjective sense of membership in a single political community (Williams, 2003: 209) in McDonough & Feinberg (2003).

Kiwan (2008) states that when addressing the conception of citizenship, it is vital that it be looked at in terms of four models/categories which are *moral, legal, participatory and identity based*. With reference to the *moral* dimension, Kiwan argues that is important since it will train citizens within a democratic society to know the importance of valuing justice as well as working towards building close relationships with others which will ultimately lead to the construction of just societies. Haydon (2000) in Kiwan (2008) also adds that citizenship education should help citizens to understand morality issues which cut across the public and private spheres.

Regarding the *legal* conception of citizenship, the argument is that education should help citizens to broaden their scope of understanding pertaining to issues that have to do with human rights discourses. Citizenship education in schools focuses on making learners understand the nature and practices of participation in a democracy as well as having an understanding of their rights, roles and responsibilities as members of a community (Qualifications and Curriculum Authority, 1998).

The development of informed citizens in a democracy is nurtured by the promotion of their *participation* in the socio-economic and political spheres of society. As such, the conception of participation within any education system is important since it arms the learners with knowledge regarding the importance of participation in all government businesses as well as playing a fundamental role in the development of their communities. Blunkett (2008) quoted in Kiwan (2008) indicates that it is crucial in every democracy for people to be informed so that

they can actively participate at the same time understanding the importance of taking part in both civil and civic activities.

Finally, as suggested earlier, *identity-based* conceptions of citizenship help build citizens who can function productively within multicultural societies by respecting diversity and the identity of others. When schools promote the teaching and practice of citizenship within their parameters, they are likely to end up with democratically informed learners who can participate effectively within the local, national and global environment. Identity-based conceptions of citizenship prepares citizens to be anti-racism, respect multiculturalism as well as being able to accommodate those whose background differs from theirs (Kiwan, 2008). Education that focuses on producing citizens who can build good societies should help the learner understand the importance of good relationships between the individual and the group so that they live together harmoniously despite their diverse political and social ideologies (Durkheim, (1911) cited in Filloux, 2001). The practice of democratic education in schools is meant to socialize learners to become functional citizens in diverse multicultural societies. Schools which cherish democratic principles within multicultural societies are supposed to produce citizens who can challenge existing discriminatory practices in school and society which compromise educational equality and social justice.

Research Questions

In addressing the objectives of the study, the researchers used the following questions:

1. Do you think the prefectship system is relevant to the democratic process in schools?
2. What mechanisms are in place within the school that are used in the promotion of students' democratic participation?

3. Does the prefectship system in schools have an influence on students' active participation in the national elections?

Findings and Discussions

The purpose of having student leadership in the school is to involve the students in the running of the school organization since this will result in improved discipline and the building of a democratically active society. Botswana's philosophy on Education, *Education for Kagisano*, sees democracy as a very important element of the country's education system. Monyatsi (2005) contends that the first Commission on Education of 1977 took further the principle of democracy and emphasized that the structure and organization of education must reflect the four national principles (democracy, development, self-reliance and unity) and that any features of the education system which impaired democracy should be changed. Botswana schools therefore should be seen to be using the prefectship system as one way of teaching or advancing democratic values for robust citizenship.

Democracy Through the Prefectship System: Easier Preached than Practiced

Although some of the interviewees acknowledged the presence of democracy in the prefect election process, this study has revealed that there is still a lot to be done in terms of the duties of the prefects in the schools. Schools are supposed to empower students through the creation of little democratic pockets where the students can put their hearts and mind in the decision-making process but apparently the prefectship system acts towards the disempowerment of students. Below is a presentation of the analysis of data from School Heads, Department Heads, Teachers, Prefects and Students on the issue of the prefectship system in schools.

Heads of Departments' Views

When asked about what specific duties one thinks prefects should carry out in schools, a Head of Department at Batanani responded:

Prefects should continue doing what they have been doing all along. They should supervise others during meal times and extracurricular activities. Help teachers in the supervision of study and general cleaning. (Interview Excerpt)

A Head of Department at Ramoja responded by saying:

Here prefects, dish food during meals times, conduct assembly, supervise afternoon and Saturday studies, help teachers in supervising general cleaning and sometimes help teachers in organizing “June 16” (The Day of the African Child) commemoration.(Interview Excerpt)

When asked whether the issue of electing prefects has an influence on the active participation of students in the general elections as future citizens, a Head of Department at Batanani answered:

Yes, I strongly agree that it has a great influence looking at the fact that during the three days of campaigning and manifesto presentation the school was lively. Students showed a lot of enthusiasm. (Interview Excerpt)

Another Head of Department at Ramoja responded to the same question by saying:

Not much, I think we need to do more like conducting an induction workshop for elected leaders and put in place a coherent system which will nurture and coach them. (Interview Excerpt)

Still on the same question, another Head of department at Batanani outlined that according to his views, their school is nurturing participation of students in the democratic

process since their prefects were democratically elected through the ballot-box after declaring their interests on various positions. The question that springs to mind is whether the duties reflected above really empower students democratically in the decision-making process or they are basically just about policing other students.

School Heads' Views

When responding to a question on whether the prefectship system in his school is meeting the intended objectives of trying to live and practice democracy, the School Head at Ramoja said:

Not 100% but there is progress, students learn and practice leadership skills, but I would like to see more and more involvement of students in issues that pertain to their well being. (Interview Excerpt)

The School Head at Batanani responded to the same question by saying; 'not much, I think we need to involve them in almost all our decision-making processes but you know, it is just practically impossible.' Pearl & Knight (1999) add:

The executive function of a student government is to administer a variety of programs (e.g. students' assemblies, excursions, dances, sports days, science and art fairs, safety and security and supervision of community service). The legislative function, in addition to the aforementioned fiscal responsibilities, includes establishing rules by which students must line. The judicial responsibility is to provide due process and to determine consequences for rule infractions (p.106).

Schools are key means through which we can promote democracy and yet they are also part of an education system in which anti-democratic values continue to flourish. To achieve democracy within a school we need to change our approach to education. Schools should help

pupils in decision-making and get them involved in decisions that concern them through the prefectship system. On a positive note, it was good learning that students' leadership at the two research sites were brought to power by students through the ballot box although the electorates' names were screened by the school administration. The big question now is, are the prefects being used for the intended purpose? The answer becomes a big No! The interviewees revealed that they are used in those activities that advance the interest of the school authorities, especially on discipline issues and spying on wrong doers.

Prefects should not be seen as a radical group advocating students' strikes (as often alleged by school authorities) but as a body which is used to facilitate dialogue and exchange of ideas and concerns between students, school authorities and parents, which will manifest improvement of facilities, students' welfare and the general running of the school. Jotia (2008) correctly argues, "Prefects are the eyes and ears of the administration that do not have power whatsoever. Their decision-making potential is suppressed and generally the authorities strangle their voices and they deny them full exposure to how democracy functions (p.155).

When responding to the question on whether the selection of prefects in schools had any influence on students' active participation later in the national general elections, the School Head at Ramoja responded by saying:

Yes, I agree that there is direct correlation here. The way the students campaigned and presented their manifestos was very interesting. Those who were voting did it with much zeal. They didn't mind the long queues they were subjected to. The way they celebrated after the announcement of the results showed that in future the country should forget about voter apathy. (Interview Excerpt)

Given the above assertion, it could be argued that giving students a chance to play various roles in school produces a set of principles which make students understand democracy as a value system, as well as a method of associating with one another and learning how to solve or confront problems together within the boundaries of solidarity and validating human dignity (Henderson & Kesson, 1999). Students who are accorded an opportunity to embark on democratic practices at an early stage in school will develop habits of human efficiency as well as developing proper habits which are productive in the national democratic project.

Students' Views

When asked about what they think the role of prefects should be within the school system, one student at Batanani charged:

Our prefects are supposed to report those teachers who never mark our work. They should also be involved in the school's decision-making process. For instance, we need a better tuck-shop and a good library, our prefects are supposed to be discussing this issues with the administration. We also need better food at our school and if our prefects cannot represent us, who else will?

Unafas & ISTP (2009, p.5) posit that prefects assist in maintaining discipline, by guiding and supervising other students, they therefore help to manage, guide and lead all school matters in a smooth manner. Prefects ought to be debating and discussing key fundamental and controversial issues especially given Cogan's (1989) observation that in a democratic process people have to thrive on controversy through the consideration of a multitude of perspectives so as to reach a consensus which will benefit all of them.

On a comparative note, when asked whether the prefectship system in their school is meeting the intended objectives, one teacher at Ramoja simply said, "No" and elaborated that the

prefects are used by the school administration for a wrong purpose. The teacher lamented that in their orientation programme, prefects are told that they are responsible for ensuring the smooth functioning of the school in matters of peace, order and discipline and strict respect of school rules without fear or favor. Nothing is ever mentioned on representing the interests of the student body on a full force and that on its own is problematic.

A student at the same site said he was disappointed with the prefects because they “elected” them with the hope that they will take their voices to the school administration but it seems they are afraid of talking to the teachers and administration about their problems. The student further contested that the fact that prefects remain silent on issues that matter certainly verifies the fact that prefects are just puppets and stooges of the school administration. A student at the same site charged:

No, what we see in our school is that prefects are taking responsibility in areas which do not suit them. They do work for the kitchen people instead of representing us. Basically they are more of mere messengers of the school administration than anything else. This is really terribly. (Interview Excerpt)

The prefectship system has to be used to transform the schools towards democracy. In a democracy there should be consultation and active public participation in the decision-making processes. If schools can see prefects as stakeholders in the running of the schools and involve them in their decision-making processes, then they can achieve functional and rewarding democracy which can benefit the country in future. Schools should refrain from using prefects as puppets of the administration or school’s watchdogs and should instead involve them in matters of paramount importance such as academics and general issues of institutional development and critical decision-making.

The prefects can also come together with other stakeholders in an attempt to resolve problems that are faced by the students in their everyday lives and coming up with solutions to such problems. Jotia (2008) notes:

The SRC (prefects) need to be used as a democratic structure that helps solicit student's voice and be a mouthpiece between school administration, parents and the student body... SRC will provide meaningful platforms for student's leadership opportunities by engaging in discussions with the schools authorities on matters related to school management, curriculum and the general welfare of the student community. To further enhance development of future leaders, the SRC can also liaise with teachers, parents and school administrators to organize and facilitate workshops that benefit youth on topic such as HIV/AIDS, teenage pregnancy, drug and alcohol abuse, sexual harassment, environment, gender equity, citizenship, voter education to mention only a few (p.164).

On the basis of the above, it could be concluded that prefects need to work hand in hand with parents, teachers and administrators on matters deemed paramount to the academic environment as well as those linked to the general wellbeing of the student body. The top-down management style which school administrators use to run schools compromises the existence of sound democratic habits.

Although there was a general claim from School Heads and Heads of Departments that prefects were elected democratically to their "offices" most of the students held a different view. One student at Batanani contended:

May be I do not understand what democracy means. Although people claim that we elect our own leaders, I was shocked to learn that the person I voted for was not part of the student government although he won the elections and I understand the school

administration took him out of the list because they say he is troublesome. I do not think that is fair because that person is going to represent the student community and not the administration. (Interview Excerpt)

Teacher's Views

When asked about the correlation between national elections and the election process for prefects, an assistant teacher at Batanani indicated that the student body and the candidates were much interested in what was happening during the campaigning and manifesto presentation during the prefect's selection period. Another teacher also reflected that students were much interested in the whole election process and many of them were seen queuing to cast their votes. She went further to say she thinks the enthusiasm was an influence from the previous national general elections thus making us contend that national elections and "democratic practices" in schools do influence one another.

Another teacher at Ramoja said students liked the idea of voting and think in future when they become eligible voters in the national elections; they won't miss the chance to vote. He further said though it wasn't a party affair (based on political parties), some students were happy to see those they supported becoming victorious while others were disappointed because of the losses suffered by their preferred candidates. Giving students platforms for democratic participation in schools will help them grow as active and effective citizens. It also helps students to have a sense of responsibility and be in a position to make good judgments and act in an intelligent way. White & Openshaw (2005) in Jotia (2008) share:

As indicated by Dewey in his address to American School administrators in 1937, democratic principles are essential to educational institutions, if political democracy is to survive. Schools need to embrace and practice democratic habits so as for students to

experience and practice democracy in their daily school lives, which ultimately will motivate them to partake in national politics by having a voice in the formulation of policies that govern people. Because the aim of education is to free individuals from barriers that would prevent them from cooperating and supporting each other as members of inclusive communities, it is necessary for the institutions of learning to also be inclusive democratic communities (p.117).

Surprisingly another teacher at Ramoja dismissed the existence of democracy by contending:

We are in an institution where the school administration wants to create an intimidating platform for both students and teachers. Communication is absolutely horrible and at times we just hear about things in the corridors and the poor prefects are just used as messenger boys and girls for the administration. The school administrators at times just announce things to the entire school community without firstly engaging us and the student leaders in the decision-making process. Democracy does not work like that. In a democracy, students' leaders, teachers and the administrators are supposed to come together and caucus on issues that matter so as to promote everybody's welfare within the school arena. Unfortunately, I do not see that happening and is real sad more so we claim to be a democratic institution. (Interview Excerpt)

An assistant teacher at Batanani also contended that prefects' supervision of study, dishing of food to other students and helping with the supervision of toilet cleaning and the general cleaning of the school was not enough evidence to justify the existence of democracy in school. Another teacher at Ramoja observed that it was essentially crucial for prefects to be involved in decision-making committees, supervision in different areas such as general cleaning

and study time so that they can be empowered. She suggested also empowering prefects to punish by way of detaining students for some hours after school, sweeping of the classroom after study and cleaning of the toilets which most students abhor.

One teacher at Batanani testified that prefects at their school do obvious jobs such as study supervision, supervising during meal times, general cleaning and generally maintaining order in the school. Another teacher said prefects should supervise meals and study time and act as intermediaries between the teachers, the administration and the students. He added that prefects should communicate with teachers and school administration about the welfare of the students, citing issues such as food (menu), toilets and dress code. Discussing citizenship and democracy in schools, Osler (2006) states:

Students usually appear to be much more interested in quality of life issues than in curriculum issues. Toilets, food, lockers, dress code, travel, safety, rights, privileges, rules are all perennial items for discussion, suggestion and complaint (p.138).

From what the respondents have said, it clearly shows that prefects in secondary schools are used as the wheels of the administration in maintaining a friendly and orderly school instead of advancing the interests of the students which include ascertaining that students are not abused through the use of corporal punishment as well as reporting teachers who fail to pursue their duties properly.

A social studies teacher at Ramoja charged that prefects are not doing enough in their duties as representatives of the student body. The teacher argued that the administration's failure to empower prefects is tantamount to abandoning democratic principles which they advocate in social studies lessons. The general feeling is that in order for prefects to become active and

efficient leaders in school and even beyond, they ought to be given a platform where they can autonomously partake in the decision-making process.

Prefect's Views

Although the school authorities appear to be happy with operations of the prefectship in school, a student who is a prefect at Ramoja held a different opinion:

In as much as we are involved in the voting process, I do not really think that the student body has much of a say regarding who becomes a prefect at the end of the day because the school authorities screen down the names of the elected students leaders and bring in their own favorites. That is not democracy. The other worrying issue is that prefects are supposed to implement imposed rules and regulations from the administration which basically make them feel useless because they are not allowed to be innovative.

(Interview Excerpt)

Another prefect at Batanani had a perplexing view regarding the issue about the existence of democracy in schools:

For me I think democracy can only prevail if both teachers and the administration can stop using us as their school police officers. It appears as though all they want is for us to report the so-called trouble makers to them and they never give us a chance to come up with ideas which could help improve the running of the school. So for me I am not stupid, I am not going to run around reporting my colleagues so that they become subjected to corporal punishment. (Interview Excerpt)

When responding to the question on what they would do given a chance to change the manner in which the school was run under the prefectship system, a prefect at Ramoja stated:

Firstly the school authorities should have their hands-off especially when it comes to the selection of prefects because at times they reject some of the students who have been elected by the student body just because they feel that the students can cause trouble.

Secondly, I want to see myself developing into a leader by being involved in the decision-making process rather than supervising meals and writing down the names of trouble makers. I want to attend serious meetings and have my voice heard. (Interview Excerpt)

Contrary to the views of the School Heads and Heads of departments regarding the efficiency of the prefectship system in schools, a prefect at Batanani charged:

I personally feel that as a prefect I would feel valued only if both teachers and the administration gave me the freedom to use my mind especially on issues which affect students. I am really disappointed that we are never given a chance to run the affairs of the students, instead we are expected by the School Head to always side with him on issues and I do not think that is fair. Some of us were hand-picked by the teachers and the administration to be prefects and it looks as though we are just servants who are serving the master without question. (Interview Excerpt)

Given the above assertions, it could be concluded that the understanding and the interpretation of the concept of democracy in schools differs especially when taking into the perspectives of school administrators, teachers, ordinary students as well as the students' leaders themselves (prefects). Giving every member of the school community especially the students a voice in the running of the affairs of the schools should be a prerequisite for promoting democratic platforms in educational institutions. Schools are supposed to promote democratic engagements by giving students a chance to act on critical issues so that they can develop skills

and attitudes which will help them to become independent and responsible leaders. Critical analysis, practical skills, value clarity, and self confidence lead to empowerment and participation in the democratic process and also help students to develop the political courage to work towards the resolution of their real life problems (Campbell, 2004).

Limitations

The study limited itself to junior secondary schools. Time as well as financial constraints hampered the researchers from covering a large area. Some students and teachers did not feel free to disclose information to the researchers as they were skeptical about divulging internal information to outsiders especially information pertaining to the general administration of the school. The topic was also political in nature and made both teachers and students to be uncomfortable in discussing supposedly “political issues.” Since teachers are regarded as members or servants of the public service, according to their code of conduct document, they are not supposed to be seen to be actively involved in political issues. Therefore, naturally when a study of this nature is presented before teachers some automatically distance themselves from the study so as to avoid being victimized by their employer in case they share information which could be deemed political in nature. It is for this reason that most of the teachers prefer to share their voices through the teachers’ unions which are the bodies mandated to represent them in both the socio-economic and political matters.

Summary

This study reveals that students’ leadership in schools to some degree does exist but the students are not given the opportunity to fully participate, represent and serve the interests of the student body. School administrators use student leadership structures to their benefits. It is high time that school authorities realize that if used properly, student leadership could

enable students to develop skills and processes needed for independent enquiry and civic decision-making throughout their lifetime. These are capacities needed if at all constitutional democracy is to work which will in turn impact on the production of democratically active citizens under the goals of *Education for Kagisano*. This study certainly was an eye opener in as far as exploring the interrelationship between democracy, the prefectship system, education as well as active citizenship engagement in the democratic process. The study definitely opens more avenues to interrogate further those issues pertaining to education, democracy, the prefectship system or student's leadership as well as the general ways in which schools could be turned into platforms for democratic engagement in Botswana. Gutmann (1999) shares that schools are the legitimate and proper institutions which are supposed to teach children civic culture as well as democratic politics so that eventually they can actively participate in the running of democratic governments. Botswana junior secondary schools ought to create conducive spaces for the practice of democracy so that students can leave school having acquired skills and attitudes as well as behaviors which nurture continued existence and survival of a democratic culture.

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Appendix A

Interview Questions for Students and Prefects

1. What is your understanding of the term democracy?
2. What do you think a democratic school would look like?
3. Do you think your school is democratic? Explain.
4. How do the student leaders get to office?
5. What is your reaction to the manner in which student leaders were brought to office?
6. If you were given a chance to change the way your school is run what would you change?
7. Do you think schools help produce future responsible citizens? Explain.
8. What do you think is the relationship between voting or being involved in the decision-making process in school and your involvement in the national elections?



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