

CHAPTER 15

Reconciling Democracy and Responsibility in Schools

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To some extent, democracy deals with rights and freedoms. However, there is no absolute freedom when one interacts with other people in a social environment and in social institutions. While exercising one's rights and freedoms, one needs to observe the responsibilities that go with them. Without observing responsibilities in a democratic environment, social life becomes chaotic and unbearable. While democracy entails free choice, the responsibility has got a moral obligation. As stated by Burke (1989: 4) 'responsibility must be more practically as well as more theoretically informed.' One must know how to practically apply general principles of a responsible citizen in a democratic situation.

However, in recent times, it has been observed that due to misunderstanding of democracy, students as well as teachers in Malawi have exercised their rights and freedoms irresponsibly. Students have boycotted classes, gone on strike, pushed some students out of classes and so on without following a proper procedure as dictated by democratic principles. As stated by Fabiano (2006), the Principal of Chancellor College: 'In the recent past, we have witnessed a number of disruptions of, and threats to disrupt, core activities and services at Chancellor College. Reasons have been advanced for the actions taken or planned Such actions are sometimes taken as an expression of our rights and freedoms, suffice to say this is perfectly accepted provided it does not impinge negatively on other people's rights and freedoms. In addition, freedom without responsibility may not reflect the real world we live in.'

While the principal indicated that people have the right to express their rights and freedoms, he seems to show that these have to go with responsibilities. As he indicated, freedom without

Freedom goes with responsibility

A balance must be stricken in school as in life in general

responsibility does not reflect a real life situation. Similarly, we have heard of teachers gone on strike before they exhaust all the necessary procedures as demanded by democratic values. These are the problems we need to deal with in education in order to make our democracy a reality. Teachers have a responsibility to make students aware of responsible behaviour in a democracy. Students should recognize their responsibilities and their rights for them to behave in a democratically appropriate way. For this to successfully happen, teachers should also know their rights and responsibilities. It is therefore the purpose of this chapter to discuss some of the responsibilities that teachers and students need to observe in a democratic society and institutions. These responsibilities will be discussed with reference to our experiences of democracy in Malawi.

Respect for authority

*Democracy
needs
leadership*

The first responsibility is respect for authority. Authority in this chapter means legitimate leadership at any level for example a principal, teacher, prefect or any administrator or manager. In Malawi, when democracy was ushered in, many people understood it as freedom to defy authority. Teachers as well as students defied authority and went on strike at any time whenever they felt like it. They thought they were now free to express their rights to the authorities in any way they wanted. However, democracy does not mean freedom from leadership. Leadership is very crucial in a democratic society and leaders need to be given due respect for them to be able to make decisions in a democratic way. If leaders are pressed by any irresponsible behaviour by their subordinates, they may turn into autocratic leaders in order to make things move. In so doing, democracy fails. So both the students and the teachers need to understand that respecting authority helps those in power to exercise the power responsibly by abiding to the rules and values of a democratic society.

Likewise, those in authority need to respect the less powerful hence the respect becomes reciprocal. In authority, as stated by Weber (quoted by Clifton and Roberts 1993: 55), ‘people comply voluntarily. Voluntary compliance is rooted in a shared set of objectives and mutual acceptance of the prevailing culture and social structure.’ Clifton and Roberts (1993: 57) continue to write: ‘... the

reciprocal rights and obligations that unite people who hold different statuses in an authoritative relationship are not legitimated by self interests, as is the case with claims, but, rather, are legitimated by some collective interests.’

*Reciprocal
respect for
collective
interests*

Consequently, teachers need to be democratic in the way they handle students, in teaching and in other school activities in relation to their interest and the interest of the others. As supported by Gutman (1987: 76): ‘the professional responsibility of teachers is to uphold the principle of non-repression by cultivating the capacity for democratic deliberation.’ Gutman continues to say that democratic education obligates teachers to support the intellectual and emotional preconditions for democratic deliberation among future generations of citizens. According to him, among these preconditions are the recognition of common interests among citizens and the related commitment to reconsider individual interests in the light of understanding the interests of others. Therefore it is the responsibility of teachers to build capacity in students for critical reflection on democratic culture.

Commitment to work

The second responsibility is commitment to work. When democracy was introduced in Malawi, there was no civic education on how people should behave in a democratic society. As such, teachers and students tended to be less committed to their work: teaching in case of teachers and attendance of classes in the case of students. Both students and teachers could absent themselves from classes without any valid reasons. Students could also neglect their assignments in the name of exercising their rights. It is therefore important that teachers and students should know that commitment to work is one of the responsibilities of the democratic citizen. For democracy to be sustained, both students and teachers need to be committed to their work of learning and teaching respectively. Each of them needs to fulfil their obligations in the school. Lack of commitment on the part of the teachers at the time democracy was introduced, could be a reflection on the laxity of the authorities where some were busy engaging themselves in corrupt activities.

*Duties must
be fulfilled*

Participation

Neglect of participation may lead to autocratic rule

The third responsibility is participation. While in Malawi everybody seems to subscribe to democracy, their participation in decision making is rather low. Because the people were used to having decisions made for them in the autocratic regime, when they now are asked to participate in decision making, they either do not respond or respond very late with no tangible comments to the issues raised. For example, many times when a head of department sends memos to staff to comment upon a decision most of the time there are no responses and the head ends up making the decision alone. Even when one asks members of staff to contribute agenda items for a meeting one rarely gets any. This lack of response frustrates a leader who wants to make decisions in a collegial model. The ailing consciousness on this point is also evident in textbooks. Chimombo (1999: 51) states that ‘an examination of civic education pamphlets reveals that the issue of participation either was not addressed or was dealt with clumsily’. Teachers as well as students need to realize that in democracy one has the responsibility to participate in all affairs that affect them. Teachers must give students chance to participate in decision making and students must be willing to participate in school in matters pertaining to their life.

Participation builds character

Once students learn to participate, they will be responsible citizens in the affairs of a democratic society. Indeed they will actively participate in matters like voting and other activities. As stated by Gutman (1987: 90): ‘a participatory approach gives priority to cultivating self esteem and social commitment over humility and order, a priority presumed by the democratic goal of educating citizens willing and able to participate in politics’. He emphasizes that schools should be structured to help teachers cultivate the capacity for critical deliberation in their classrooms. When participatory virtues are cultivated they may lead to a desire to participate in politics, to social commitment and to respect for opposing views. Teachers should be able to make students intellectually independent. However, as Gutman further states: ‘too much independence ... can be as bad as too little’ hence the need to exercise independence with responsibility.

Negotiation

Another tool of a responsible democrat is negotiation. As stated earlier students and teachers in Malawi have been seen taking industrial action before they exhaust all the negotiations that are demanded in a democratic society. While they might have a good cause, they may be found acting illegally because of failure to follow appropriate negotiation procedures. It is undemocratic to smash other people's cars and block roads and pathways which are used by people who are not concerned with the disputes at hand. For students to learn to negotiate they need to practise the skill of negotiation with their teachers. MacJessie-Mbewe (1999) observes that if teachers and students sit down and negotiate change and the teachers show willingness to listen and value the views of the students, they become proud of their teachers. When students are valued in negotiations and see the fruits of the negotiation process they may internalize the process so that it becomes part and parcel of their lifestyle. They may not jump into strikes whenever there are misunderstandings with the school authority before negotiations have been tried. Negotiation is indeed a management strategy but there is need for sufficient information on the issues at stake. Those with the relevant knowledge must make this available in a convenient way before others get frustrated.

Negotiation must build on sufficient information

System knowledge

Finally, to acquire knowledge of the system, be it a school, an organization or the political system in one's own country, is an important responsibility for every citizen. Any system requires well articulated rules, regulations and procedures to be followed by all parties. The leadership has a special obligation to make sure that such rules, regulations and procedures exist and are clearly communicated to the public. The person who knows the system within which s/he lives, knows where to seek relevant information and where to turn for appropriate action. Ignorance of such regulations is no defence for disrupting activities even when frustration runs high. Schools represent an important arena for practising democracy. Both teachers and students will know that although education is a right, it requires them to be in school, to know the rules and abide by them as a matter of responsibility.

Good procedures must exist, be known and practised

Concluding remarks

Teachers and students must have a common understanding of responsibility

This chapter has discussed the responsibilities that go with democracy and has shown that democracy does not give total freedom or freedom without constraints. While being aware that the chapter has not exhaustively discussed all responsibilities that go with democratic practice, it has pointed out that a responsible democrat should show respect for authority, commit one self to work as opposed to being laize-fair, participate in matters of common interest, negotiate change before industrial action and gain knowledge of the system in which one operates. Teachers and students need to have a common understanding of their responsibilities for democracy to be productive. Disruptions that may emanate from disagreements between two parties in education should target those responsible for the problem. In short, it is the duty of teacher training institutions and the schools to teach also through practise democratic ways and thus nurture an appropriate democratic culture.

Questions

1. Identify rights and freedoms for teachers and students. For each right and freedom discuss responsibilities that go with them.
2. Discuss how students may negotiate change with the school authorities.
3. Discuss how teachers would use authority rather than authoritarianism to make students obey and achieve school goals and objectives.
4. Discuss the process you would take to make students develop a democratic culture with responsibility.

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