

## CHAPTER 16

# Possibilities and Challenges in initiating democratic Practices in Schools in Malawi

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### Introduction

Traditional African societies have stressed the importance of obedience and respect for elders among the youth. The traditional Swahili saying *adabu njema na heshima* (humility, good behaviour and respect for elders) emphasises the need for young children to obey elders. Similarly the saying '*mau akulu akoma akagonela*' (elders' words become sensible after a year) bears testimony to the importance that the Chewa of Eastern Southern Africa attach to the importance of obedience of youth to elders. Elders, as Mbigi (2005) maintains, are paragons of wisdom in African societies. The dictatorial regimes of Africa also called on obedience of all citizens. Children in Malawi, for example, were instructed to obey without asking questions. It is in such an authoritarian society that this chapter seeks to suggest ways of bringing about democratic practices.

*Elders are  
repository of  
wisdom*

Patriarchy, typical of many African societies, calls for unquestioning obedience to the older person, especially the male (Mirembe 2002: 291). Therefore, young people, especially girls, learn to be subordinates. In this connection it is reasonable to argue that Africa's history offers little precedent for the citizens to embrace democracy in their national institutions such as schools. This authoritarianism in schools seems to be reproduced from this macro-culture. Mirembe argues that we need more in place to lay the foundations for democratic values in our culture. Schools, sup-

posedly agents of change, are still largely bureaucratic and unresponsive to the need of change. Lessons are teacher-led, denying young people a choice of producing knowledge and being in charge of their learning. In this way authoritarianism may be understood as a system where students are being taught to sit submissively in front of a teacher.

*Need for a  
democratic  
culture*

Mirembe argues that democratic practices can exist alongside autocratic practices in a system because of the significant link between democracy and human rights. Given the situation described above, there is therefore little reason to delay the work for initiating democratic practices in schools in Malawi. Human Development Report (2002: 4) claims that democracy that empowers people must be constructed through interaction of pupils and the staff – it cannot be imported. Consequently, building on elements of democratic procedures in existing Malawian culture seems to be a viable approach.

## **Some aspects of traditional culture**

### **The Yao village**

Traditionally, people in Malawi live in villages. A village is an ascertainable locality in which one or more groups of persons reside in separate houses, subject to the authority of a village headperson. The Village Head (VH) had several responsibilities and duties which included public and religious transactions. The VH also was considered the owner of the village. In addition, s/he was the representative of such higher authority as existed to the village members (Mitchell 1966). The VHs in any particular area recognise the superiority of one of their number, the chief of the land. The chief is a representative of her/his people and it is her/his particular duty to ensure their welfare and that of the chiefdom as a whole. The traditional leaders in Malawi have always maintained that in their view, chiefs and VHs are first and foremost rulers and leaders of their people. They owe their position as chiefs and Village Heads not to the colonial government, but to their own people. This being the case, the government has no moral right to depose or create, demote or promote chiefs.

Chiefdoms are organised on some principles. For example, a chiefdom is headed by a chief. Then under her/him the subjects are organised in villages. Each village is represented by a village head who stands in a relationship to the chief and to other VHs. The main duty of a VH is to maintain harmonious relationships within her/his village and see to the welfare of its members. His/her own behaviour is expected to be exemplary in a way consonant with her/his position. The VH is responsible for keeping the peace between the members of the village and control her/his members in their relationships with other villages. The villages act as corporate groups in turn. For example, one field of village relationships is the corporate identity of villages seen in arguments that arise over rights over waterholes dug by a village.

*Citizens' welfare and harmony are the duty of traditional leaders*

The account of the Yao village given above is similar to that of principal tribes of Malawi. Among others, the principal tribes in the country would include the Achewa, Atumbuka, Atonga and Asena. In the following some examples of traditional institutions in the village will be described, indicating a strong aspect of 'rule of law' in the culture, and rule of law is a fundamental characteristic of democracy.

*Presence of rule of law*

### **Succession disputes**

The rule of succession indicates a man's eldest sister's first born as the rightful heir. The village as a whole, as well as senior relatives, has a say in the selection of the new Village Head. They select the person who is likely to be the most suitable for the position. Here, as in most affairs, the women have an important say. Among the factors considered is the ability of the prospective VH to hold the village together. In each installation ceremony the chief has to give his/her formal consent to the succession. This is done after any succession dispute is over and the heir is decided upon.

*Women's say essential*

### **The chief's judicial functions**

In the pre-colonial days the Village Head settled most of the disputes in her/his village. The chief settled most of the serious disputes in her/his chiefdom. Cases were tried following natural justice where witnesses would be called and cross examined. After the evidence is sifted a decision is made. The losing party has the

*Values as guides*

opportunity to appeal to the higher authority. The persons hearing the case would act with reference to a set of values common and understood in the village and/or in the chiefdom.

### **Legal nature of marriage**

The consent of both parties to marry each other and the assent of the prospective spouses' parents is legally and customary essential for the validity of the marriage. In addition, the assent of marriage guardians is important. The main duties of a marriage guardian include the settlement of matrimonial disputes, guidance of the spouses in matrimonial proceedings and general supervision of the spouses and their children. The standard procedure for negotiating marriage is as follows:

*Standard procedure*

- The boy and the girl agree to marry
- The boy and girl may exchange gifts.
- The boy and girl exchange information regarding the identity of their parents and maternal/paternal uncles.
- The boy informs his uncle(s) of his agreement with the girl.
- The boy's uncle(s) seeks the opinion of the elders about the boy's proposal.
- The boy's uncle(s) having obtained the approval of the elders institutes formal negotiations with the girl's uncles and elders.
- A further meeting is arranged for a later date to enable the girl's uncle(s) to consult his family elders, and to make private enquiries about the boy's character and family background.
- At the meeting, if the boy's proposal is accepted, a convenient date is fixed for the conclusion of the marriage negotiations. Meanwhile, the boy will be encouraged to visit the girl's home. At some point he will be shown a piece of land on which he is expected to build the matrimonial home.

*Marriage sealed by elders*

Betrothal may be arranged either directly between a boy and a girl, or between their uncles on their behalf. Betrothal does not confer on the parties the right of cohabitation. The marriage may be regarded as formed when the girl is handed over by her marriage guardian(s) to the boy. The parties may now begin cohabitation. The handing over may be accompanied by special formalities and ceremonies. On the appointed day, the boy, accompanied by suit-

able male and female relatives, goes to the girl's village, where a feast is prepared. During or after the feasting, the parties receive instruction as to their matrimonial behaviour and obligations, where after they become entitled to cohabit as husband and wife. The precise details of the ceremonies accompanying the formation of marriage may differ slightly from one tribe to another (Ibik 1970). What seems to be clear from above is the observation that everyone in the village had a voice in matters of common concern and negotiations is a usual method of making decisions with long lasting consequences.

## School management

This chapter will now describe some aspects of school management as recommended by the Ministry of Education vis-à-vis the traditional practices, discussed above, from which both school personnel and pupils do come.

To ensure effective and successful management the Head Teacher must be innovative, resourceful and dynamic. In addition, the head should be able to interact well with people both within and outside the school. Such people would include the staff and pupils, parents, members of the Parent Teacher Association (PTA) and many other members of the community all of whom need to be brought, in some way or other, into decision making processes. The Head Teacher must therefore create an environment for participatory democracy in the running of the school (Commonwealth Secretariat 1993, module 7: 29). Democracy at the school level should also connect with traditional culture in some ways. Some pupils would be elected into some offices such as prefects and monitors.

Gutman (cited in Mizzi 2006) states that schools represent a site of conscious social reproduction that shapes the ways in which citizens are empowered to influence education that in turn shapes the values, attitudes and modes of behaviour for future citizens. The school thus plays a primary role in shaping citizens' ideals in a manner that reflects the values of the democratic state. Below, some practical examples are given of how schools in Malawi empower pupils to influence education and behaviour at their institutions in some little way.

*Create an  
environment  
for  
participation*

## **Prefects and monitors**

Prefects are appointed to assist the Head Teacher and all members of the teaching and non-teaching staff in the smooth running of the school. They are liaison officers between staff and pupils and vice versa. They are given authority over their fellow pupils and must exercise that authority firmly but fairly. The duties of the prefects include inspecting the daily work done in hostels, rooms and ablution areas. They also check the tidiness of the school grounds. They ensure that all pupils obey the school rules at all times and report any infringements to the staff on duty. They also hold regular meetings in order to assess progress in all spheres of their duties.

*Pupils and  
staff  
cooperate*

Class monitors may be appointed by the form teacher or elected by the class members. They are responsible for orderliness during lesson times. They check on the cleanliness of classrooms and the chalkboard. They record pupils' attendance in period registers which are later signed by the subject teacher. They also report to the Deputy Head Teacher when a teacher has not turned up. This is an attempt to ensure that pupils are real partners in some decision making.

## **The form teacher**

According to Grimmit (1973: 146) a teacher may be defined as a person who 'creates learning experiences and learning situations for others.' The form system is very important in the organization of the school. The form teacher is responsible for the general welfare of the class. It is the expectation of the Ministry of Education that the form teacher should be interested in the all-round growth and development of the pupils including physical, emotional, mental, social and spiritual growth. The duties of the form teacher fall into four categories. One category deals with the teacher giving the pupil help or advice. The second category deals with discipline and behaviour ensuring that pupils are punctual and that they use furniture and textbooks carefully. Third category concerns pupils' general appearance. Finally the form teacher deals with administrative functions regarding maintenance of attendance registers and records of the pupils.

## Some barriers to democratic practices in schools

### Respect for elders

A question might be raised whether there are barriers in adopting and adapting democratic practices in the Malawi classrooms. There seems to be several areas that might cause problems. First problem concerns the climate within the teaching profession itself. Where the morale is low, adapting core democratic principles like participation and accountability is likely not to be greeted with enthusiasm. Second, as previously stated, some traditional and cultural practices in Malawi seem to hinder many attempts to democratise the schools. For instance, generally first born males and older children (both genders) are expected to be respected by those who are younger. One way in which the respect is shown is for the young to accept, almost without question, ideas from the older ones or the elders. The young should not speak against them. This culture and tradition appear to continually colour the manner in which respect is given to those in senior positions in the modern job sector. Therefore any suggestions from juniors (pupils) generally have little chance of receiving attention by the superiors (the classroom teachers).

*A culture of strong hierarchy*

### The teacher is in the centre

Closely related to this factor is the general assumption that hierarchy of authority in schools is natural. This assumption is not false but surely has its limits and these limits tend to be exceeded in too many instances. In addition there is continued use of old traditional methods of teaching in the schools which would present a set of barriers for introducing democratic practices. For example, a subject teacher is seen and perceived as a central figure in the classroom. S/he is the overall authority in the teaching – learning situation. Consequently our pupils tend to look more to her/him as the provider of all knowledge in the subject. The result is that generally the pupils do little to develop the necessary self-awareness. To them, the teacher has the best answer which they should remember.

*Teacher's role essential*

Then there is serious shortage of teaching and learning resources which restricts learners from accessing information required for their lessons. For example, a recent visit to a two year old secondary

school in Blantyre showed that there were less than five copies of a prescribed textbook for a class of 40 or more pupils!

### **General scepticism to change**

*Change  
implies a  
cost*

A further barrier to democratization of education might be that there are frequent changes in both policy and personnel at all levels in the educational system. Other factors that may make democratic innovations unsuccessful according to Commonwealth Secretariat (1998) include: fear of the unknown, threat to status, threat to power base, custom bound, peer group norms and reluctance to let go. The foregoing seems to be normal impediments to democratisation. It is generally felt that a certain amount of willingness to take risks about innovations is necessary and that considerable gains are within reach.

The introduction of democratic practices in education has many advantages, for instance allowing people to express their views, increase self esteem, each one having a say such as disadvantaged groups and others. In view of these advantages it should not be difficult to give the adoption and sustainability of democratic practices in Malawi schools a try. The teachers do not have to spend another year doing the same in the same place in the same way.

### **Concluding remarks**

*Cultural  
practices can  
facilitate  
adoption and  
sensibility of  
democratic  
schools*

This chapter is based on the belief that any positive change nourishes recommitment (Barth 1990) and that democratic education is a suitable option for Malawi schools. Recognition of democratic elements in Malawian tradition is an important starting point. Examples are the role of traditional leaders and some practices in the society and schools of Malawi. On this background more democratic practices may be promoted and maintained in the schools and classrooms. The author is consciously hopeful of the Malawian education system to make a transition from autocratic to democratic school management. However, for this to be realized there is need for stakeholders to work tirelessly in propagating democratic management styles. This amounts to teaching citizens to respect other citizens' and partners' ideas regardless of age, colour or gender. We should strive to teach *for* democracy and not only *about* democracy<sup>45</sup>.

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<sup>45</sup> See chapter 1: Learning Citizenship in Democracy.



## Questions

1. Given the current situation in the education system in Malawi, what proposals for change might be put forward?
2. In what ways might the head teacher, teachers and pupils become co-investigators in the teaching learning processes?
3. How might we assist head teachers to adopt and adapt democratic practices in their schools?
4. Are there any indicators among school personnel that suggest any readiness for attitudinal change? Any examples?
5. Where and how do we begin to engage the teachers for sensitisation?

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