School Children on the Rampage: Young Citizen Activism or Manipulation? A Case of Primary School Pupils' Unrest in Malawi

Peter Ngwinjo Namphande
University of Malawi
School of Education
P.O. Box 280
Zomba
pnamphande@unima.ac.mw

Abstract

The democratisation process in sub-Saharan Africa saw a rise in student protests in secondary schools and universities. Of late, primary school pupils in Malawi have been taking to the streets in protests for various reasons. This paper reports on a case study of a primary school where pupils protested following the relocation of a 'good teacher' from their school. The study explored whether the protest was a case of young citizen activism or manipulation by a teacher who was resisting transfer. The school was purposively sampled and the research participants were identified through purposive and snowball sampling. The results are presented using a chronological structure and a thematic approach. The study found that the pupils' protest was a reaction to a combination of factors ranging from continued centralization of power, and indecisiveness in handling teacher indiscipline, to locational factors. All these conspired to create a state of paralysis at the school. The paper argues and recommends for the creation of safe spaces in schools to hear authentic pupils' voice as part of learner-centred education and school democratisation.

Key words: Pupil activism; Teacher discipline; Democracy; Pupils' voice.

1.0. Introduction

Africa experienced a wave of democratisation in the 1990s following the collapse of communism that relaxed the West's hold on authoritarian regimes (Animashuan, 2020). This was part of a global trend towards democratic governance covering sub-Saharan Africa, Eastern Europe, Middle East Asia, South America, and the Far East (Davies, 1999; Harber and Trafford, 1999). For Africa, the democratisation process was filled with contradictions as it was imposed on poor countries as a condition for the receipt of aid (Englund, 2004). To access aid, countries had to adopt democratic reforms swiftly and at times reluctantly (Abdi, Ellis and Shizha, 2005). Some of the reforms were at odds with local cultures hence making implementation problematic

(Davies, Harber, and Dzimadzi, 2003; Namphande, 2021). With respect to education, challenges have been noted regarding the role of communities in school governance in a decentralised structure (Davies, Harber and Dzimadzi, 2003; Okitsu and Edwards, 2017; Rose, 2005).

In Malawi, multiparty democracy was re-introduced in 1993 after the collapse of the 1960s democratic experimentation and the subsequent rise of single-party authoritarianism. The advent of democracy led to constitutional changes, including the promotion of human rights. Essentially, all institutions had to adopt a culture of respect for human rights. In the public sector, a number of reforms were adopted. In education, for example, the reforms included the decentralisation of powers from central government to local councils and schools, increased local stakeholder participation in school decisions, and introduction of an Outcomes Based Education (OBE) curriculum with its focus on Learner-Centred Education. Pedagogical efforts under OBE were meant to put pupils at the centre of education and prepare them for their role as citizens of a democratic country. Despite the efforts towards decentralisation, the central government has maintained control over teacher recruitment, deployment, and remuneration. This centralization creates governance problems related to accountability at local levels. Furthermore, tensions still persist regarding human rights, pupils' voice, and school discipline (Namphande, 2022).

The advent of democracy saw a rise in student protests in schools. This rise was attributed to students' misunderstanding of democracy and human rights on one hand, and to students' reacting to cases of injustice at the hands of school authorities on the other hand (Kuthemba-Mwale, Hauya and Tizifa, 1996; MacJessie-Mbewe, 2007). Since the 1990s, almost all cases of student protest were confined to secondary schools. Of late, however, there have been cases of primary school pupils protesting, especially in urban areas. In the recent past, pupils from a primary school rioted apparently to protest against the relocation of a "very good teacher" from the school. This study, therefore, explored the underlying causes of the riots. The aim was to explore whether the rioting was a case of active citizenship by pupils whose voice had been marginalised, or a case of manipulation by teachers as a form of resistance to relocation. Specifically, the study set out to answer the following questions: Why did the pupils riot at the school? How did the pupils organize to stage the riots? What was the aftermath of the pupils' riots? The study argues that the pupils' protest was a reaction to a combination of factors ranging from continued centralization of power, and indecisiveness in handling teacher indiscipline, to locational factors, all of which conspired to create a state of paralysis at the school. This paper first presents a description of formal education in Malawi. This is followed by the conceptual framework, and a review of relevant literature. The methods section explains the research decisions made, provides a brief description of the case study school, and the ethical considerations. The results are presented in two segments following a chronological structure and a thematic approach. This is followed by the interpretation of the results in the concluding remarks, highlighting some recommendations.

2.0. Formal Education in Malawi

Formal education in Malawi follows an 8-4-4 structure, that is, 8 years of primary, 4 years of secondary, and up to 4 years of tertiary education. The official age range for primary school pupils is 6-13 years (Ministry of Education, 2023). At the end of the primary cycle pupils sit for the Primary School Leaving Certificate of Education (PSLCE) examinations which determine their eligibility for entry into secondary school. Access to secondary education is restrictive and is based on selection depending on candidates' performance in the high-stakes PSLCE examinations. The transition rate from primary to secondary education is 42.5% (Ministry of Education, 2023), creating very high competition among candidates. In addition, candidates are selected into a hierarchy of secondary schools. These include top-tier national secondary schools, which are very few and relatively well resourced; the second-tier district secondary schools, which have a districtwide catchment area; and the third and last-tier community day secondary schools (CDSS) which are found locally and serve several primary schools in a catchment area. Since the introduction of multiparty democracy, primary education has been free but not compulsory. In practice, parents and communities contribute income and labour towards school infrastructure development (Rose, 2003).

In terms of organisation and management of education, there is a hierarchy of authority starting with the Ministry of Education (MOE) headquarters. Below MOE are six divisional/ provincial offices, each managed by an Education Division Manager. Under the divisional offices are 34 Education Districts, each managed by a District Education Manager (DEM). Each district is sub-divided into zones which are a cluster of around 10 primary schools. The zones mostly serve the purpose of in-service teacher education. Primary Education Advisors (PEAs) manage and coordinate teacher professional development activities in each zone. Additionally, the PEAs also act as 'eyes and ears' of the DEM on management related issues (Government of Malawi, 2015).

Primary school teachers possess a secondary school leaving certificate plus a teachers' certificate. Once they graduate from a Teachers' Training College they are employed by the central government and deployed to various districts for posting to schools. The DEM is responsible for deploying new teachers to schools within the district and also transfers serving teachers from one school to another depending on need. The central government retains the responsibility for teacher remuneration, and handling of teacher discipline cases. The centralization of responsibilities, however, creates challenges related to teacher accountability. One observation is that with a primary school teacher workforce of over 74000 there are massive delays in resolving teacher discipline cases due to bureaucratic procedures. This leads to managers devising internal means of punishment to avoid the inefficiency occasioned by centralization. A World Bank study on primary education in Malawi reports that "even in cases where improper teacher behaviour is reported, this often only results in the offending teachers being transferred to another school" (Ravishankar, et. al., 2016, xviii).

3.0. Conceptualizing children's rights

The discourse of children's rights has always been a source of controversy. This is more pronounced in Africa where there is tension between some elements of the traditional culture and human rights (Chonzi, 2007; Tabulawa, 2013). Wyness, Harrison and Buchanan (2004) posit that research on children's rights presents two distinct, if not contradictory conceptualizations. These are children's rights to *welfare*, and children's rights to *self-determination*. Children's rights to *welfare* rest on adults providing care, education, and guidance to children. These provisions are made "in the best interest of the children". Hence, the adult is taken as a responsible person, better placed to articulate the needs and secure the welfare of the children than the children themselves. In political terms, the state affirms and refines the obligation that adults have over children, producing a situation where children become more dependent on adults (Wyness, et al., 2004: 88). In contrast, children's rights to *self-determination* give children the agency and degrees of autonomy to do things for themselves. In this case, *self-determination* rights can easily supersede *welfare* rights since children are in a position to overrule adult definitions of their "best interests" (Wyness, et al., 2004: 88). Hunt (2014) adds that children's rights to *self-determination* take power and obligations from adults as children have the right to make their own decisions. These rights can, therefore, be problematic because they pose a threat to adult authority and also obstruct their paternalistic and protective privileges.

Wyness, et al. (2004: 89) articulate the ambiguity between political inclusion and the imperative to protect children by making a distinction between children's "needs" and children's "interests". They argue that a "needs" model of children flows from *welfare* rights. Children's "needs" implies a deficit model of the child. In staking a claim to meet the "needs" of children, many political actors use the negative discourse of child incompetence and child innocence. In the politics of children's "needs", the child is basically absent. Similarly, Giroux (1985: 28) argues that "in the discourse of 'need fulfilment', the concept of 'need' represents an absence of a particular set of experiences". In contrast, children's "interests" suggest agency where children are viewed as active and involved, able to make claims to the state at various levels. Children's "interests", therefore, converge with children's rights to *self-determination*, the only difference being that children's "interests" are fundamentally political, defining the aims of a specific group in society. In these terms, children can be viewed as a minority group. The notion of children's "interest" hence suggests a degree of separateness from non-child groups in society and the construction of channels through which this separateness can be articulated.

In a cultural setting where primary school pupils are considered immature, teachers may exercise control and power purportedly in the "best interests" of the pupils. This position gives teachers power over pupils as they are seen to provide for the *welfare* needs of the pupils. This study, therefore, explored whether the unrest at the school

was a result of pupils making claims to their rights for *self-determination* or the failure of the school to make provision for the *welfare* needs of the pupils.

4.0. Student activism and democratisation in Africa

Students have been involved in political activities for various reasons at key points in Africa's history. With the exception of isolated cases of secondary school and high school student activism, most political activity has been confined to universities. Zeilig and Ansell (2008) state that African university students have for long been engaged in political activism, responding to changing political, social, and economic circumstances. They argue that during colonialism, students in the few universities rioted in protest against forms of segregation and agitated for political liberation and independence (Zeilig and Ansell, 2008). After independence, activism focused on wider social issues such as rising prices, falling standards of living, and unemployment. Englund (2004) asserts that the anti-colonial movements in Africa in the early and mid-twentieth century were more about self-determination than democracy. As such, the decolonized and newly independent countries were swiftly replaced by civilian dictatorships.

With dictatorship taking root and spaces for expression of dissent shrinking, universities became the only spaces for expressing discontent (Nkinyangi, 1991). This was mostly perceptible under neo-liberalism. Structural adjustment programmes (SAPs) resulted in shrinking government financing of universities, and the introduction of cost-sharing measures which brought about hard economic conditions (Benbow, 2011; Zeilig and Dawson, 2008). In the light of protests against communism in Eastern Europe, and economic hardships occasioned by the SAPs, students across Africa took the lead in fighting for a democratic transition to multiparty political systems (Benbow, 2011; Klopp and Orina, 2002; van Gyampo, 2013; Zeilig and Dawson, 2008). Englund (2004) calls the resultant democratisation Africa's second liberation.

Following this wave of transition, student activism in African universities receded (Zeilig and Dawson, 2008). Indeed, after the 1990s there was a period of silence, save for isolated cases of protests due to further deteriorating conditions brought about by the SAPs. Student activism resurfaced again in South Africa in 2015. Luescher and Klemencic (2017) describe this re-emerged activism as unique because it was activism beyond students' role in the change of governance systems. In addition, the students used both physical and online spaces to organise protests which were held for various reasons. For example, the protests which started at the University of Cape Town were aimed at decolonizing the university and getting rid of offensive colonial symbols. Known widely by the use of the Twitter handle #RhodesMustFall, the protests spread to other universities across the country addressing issues of concern such as increase in fees under the hashtag #FeesMustFall (Luescher and Klemencic, 2017). This activism was also followed by another period of silence.

As noted earlier, most of the student activism in Africa has been confined to universities. Writing about South Africa, Diseko (1992) argues that cases of student activism in secondary and high schools were rare because school principals kept a vigilant eye on students to keep politics out of schools. This could be true for the rest of Africa as cases of activism in primary and secondary schools are viewed as indiscipline. As Wyness (1999) argues, all deviant actions (by pupils, in this case) are considered subversive without focusing on their transformative potential in shifting educational agendas towards the interests of children.

Considering the subordinate role of pupils and the privileged status of teachers, this study explored whether the protest was an act of young citizen activism or manipulation by adults.

5.0. Methodology

This is a qualitative case study that focused on a single primary school as a case. The school was purposively selected because of the riots. Details about the school are presented later in this section. Purposive and snowball sampling were used to identify study participants. Data were generated from various sources to aid triangulation. Firstly, the study conducted in-depth, semi-structured interviews with various stakeholders. These were the District Education Manager (DEM), the previous headteacher of the school, the deputy headteacher, three teachers, and the Deputy Chairperson of the School Management Committee (SMC). Some of these participants had relocated to other schools and hence had to be followed to their new schools. The semi-structured interviews offered the flexibility to follow up on issues with participants and seek clarification (Thomas, 2011). Using pseudonyms, the study participants are presented in Table 1 below.

Secondly, the study held a focus group discussion with standard 8 pupils. Cohen, et al. (2011: 433) advise that "it is important to understand the world of children through their own eyes rather than the lenses of adults." Similarly, Arksey and Knight (1999) advocate for the active involvement of children in issues that affect them. The focus group discussion was appropriate for pupils because it is socially oriented and less intimidating than a one-to-one interview (Flick, 2011). Thirdly, the study reviewed official documents. The headteacher's *Log Book* provided insightful data. A file provided by the Primary Education Advisor (PEA) contained a record of events that took place prior to and after the riots. These documents served as substitutes for records of activity that could not be observed directly (Stake, 1995). The data were analyzed qualitatively, constructing a chronological structure (Cohen, et al., 2011) and developing themes. The results are presented using both thick description (Holliday, 2002), narratives, themes, and direct quotes from research participants.

Table 1: Study participants

Name of participant	**Responsibility and role during the unrest**
DEM	District Education Manager at the time of unrest and key informant in the study
Headteacher Christina	Long term Headteacher at the school. Was transferred to another school just before the riots.
Teacher Beaton	Standard 8 teacher whose transfer sparked the riots.
Teacher Thomas	First deputy headteacher under Headteacher Christina. He became acting headteacher when Headteacher Christina was transferred to another school. He was later shifted to another school just before the riots.
Deputy head	Appointed deputy headteacher after Teacher Thomas was transferred. He was available at the time of the riots and made an effort to contain the situation.
Teacher Kingsley	Another Standard 8 teacher who was available at the time of the riots.
Vice Chair Janet	Vice Chairperson of the School Management Committee (SMC). She was present at the time of the riots.
Focus group discussion (8 pupils)	Four girls and four boys randomly selected from a standard 8 class of 240 pupils. Standard 8 pupils started the riots following announcement that Teacher Beaton was on transfer.

5.1. The case study school

The case study school known as Nachiswe Primary School, is located in Chifule Urban Education District. Although designated as a school in an urban area, Nachiswe is remotely located on the fringes of the district and exhibits characteristics of a rural school. It has no electricity, and uses a borehole for its water supply. It is about 12 kilometres off the main road leading to the city and is accessed through an earth road that is impassable during the rainy season. These conditions make it difficult to retain teachers. The World Bank study on primary education in Malawi states that "levels of teacher satisfaction and motivation are greatly influenced by school location and remoteness, and the most disadvantaged teachers…are not …adequately

compensated" (Ravishankar, et. al., 2016, xviii). While teachers are in short supply nationally with an average teacher-pupil ratio of 1:61 (Ministry of Education, 2023), Nachiswe Primary School had a ratio of 1:149 at the time of data generation. In line with national decentralisation guidelines, the school had a School Management Committee (SMC) and a Parent-Teacher Association that was meant to facilitate effective school governance and community participation in school affairs respectively.

5.2. Ethical considerations

Yin (2014) recommends that between the design of a case study and the collection of data, the researcher has to show how she/ he plans to protect the human subjects in the study. In the present study, care was taken to ensure that participants were protected. More importantly, sensitivity was exercised considering that some of the participants were school pupils who were minors. Cohen, et al. (2011: 84) argue that "while truth is good, respect for human dignity is better". In this regard, a number of steps were taken to protect participants. Firstly, the study sought written permission from the DEM to collect data at the school. The permission was also helpful in gaining access to participants who had relocated to other schools within the district. Once permission was granted informed consent was sought from all participants. For the pupils, informed consent was sought from the headteacher and informed assent from the pupils themselves. Secondly, participation in this study was voluntary hence participants had the right to withdraw without giving any reasons. Finally, participants were assured of privacy and confidentiality. To maintain confidentiality and keep the study participants anonymous, pseudonyms are used for the district, the school, and the participants.

6.0. Results

The study set out to explore whether the rioting at Nachiswe Primary School was a case of active citizenship by pupils whose voice had been marginalised, or was a result of manipulation by teachers as a form of resistance to relocation. Specifically, the study set out to answer the following questions. Why did the pupils riot at the school? How did the pupils organize to stage the riots? What was the aftermath of the pupils' riots? Interestingly, although the study set out to investigate the role of pupils in the riots, it established that the major players in the build-up and the aftermath of the riots were teachers. The study established that the rioting was a culmination of a sequence of events that had been playing out in the school caused by a number of factors. The study noted that although the riots took place on 20th October, 2017, tension had been mounting since 2015 as school staff were polarized into two antagonizing camps. Camp 1 comprised of Headteacher Christina, the 1st Deputy Headteacher and 5 other teachers, while Camp 2 comprised of the 2nd Deputy Headteacher, and the remaining 8 teachers. The conflict was further complicated by family ties as Headteacher Christina and her younger sister, also a teacher at the school, originally came from the area where the school was located. These sisters and Camp 1 teachers had the sympathy of the SMC. On the other hand, the 2nd Deputy Headteacher, who belonged

to Camp 2, was married to a sister to the chief in whose area the school was located. As a result, teachers in Camp 2 had the support of the village chief and most members of the community.

In this section, the paper presents the results organized in two segments. The first segment provides a chronology of events that build up the conflict leading to the riots. The second segment presents the findings following the research questions. These segments are followed up with a discussion and interpretation of the findings, locating the position of the pupils in the conflict, and responding to the question of whether the rioting was an act of young citizen activism or manipulation.

6.1. Events building up the conflict and leading to the riot

As alluded to earlier, the conflict started building up before 2015. However, after 2015 there was an apparent period of calm until the issues resurfaced aggressively two and half years later. Documentary evidence and narratives of research participants have been reconstructed and are presented below in chronological form.

21/01/2015: The District Coordinating PEA, and two PEAs held a meeting with teachers at Nachiswe School to resolve issues after teachers complained about Headteacher Christina's management style.

06/06/2017: Teachers wrote a letter to PEAs complaining about the same issues that were addressed during the 2015 meeting.

17/06/2017: PEAs wrote a report to the DEM on their response to the letter written by teachers. The report showed that they had been to the school to meet the teachers and the SMC but Camp 2 teachers refused to discuss stating that SMC members should be excluded because they were "uneducated" and "not professionals".

23/06/2017: There was a 'mutiny' at the school whereby 9 teachers from Camp 2 held a separate school assembly declaring independence from the school administration and announcing that the school would be called by a different name. The school was to be named after a nearby river.

26/06/2017: Camp 2 teachers boycotted classes demanding the removal of Headteacher Christina from the school. A member of the community joined and attempted to grab keys from Headteacher Christina to force her out of office. To bring peace, the District Education Office provisionally suspended Headteacher Christina till further notice, and appointed Teacher Thomas, who was 1st Deputy Head, as Acting Headteacher. However, this appointment did not please Camp 2 teachers.

27/06/2017: Camp 2 teachers wrote a letter to the PEA requesting that they be transferred from the school.

18/09/2017: Camp 2 teachers boycotted classes and sent pupils home to 'wait' for 2 weeks.

19/09/2017: DEM addressed teachers at the school but detested the conduct of Camp 2 teachers which she described as "open defiance to authority". Following this meeting Headteacher Christina was formally transferred to another school. Furthermore, three Camp 2 teachers considered as "ringleaders" would also be transferred to other schools. Teacher Beaton was among the three 'troublesome' teachers.

19/10/2017: Pupils went on a rampage following an announcement during the school assembly of the transfer of the three teachers from the school. Some members of the community joined the protests, burning tires and blocking the access road to the school to prevent police vehicles from coming to the school.

The spark: The study established that the manner in which the announcement of the teachers' transfer was made was provocative. Firstly, it should be stated that although Teacher Beaton was considered as "troublesome", the Standard 8 pupils liked him because he made a commitment to the class that for the first time, not less than a hundred pupils would be selected for secondary school. Prior to this time, records showed that only around 4 pupils used to be selected. The Standard 8 class had 240 pupils. This commitment naturally made the pupils and most parents side with Camp 2 teachers. On the material day, the announcement of the transfers was made by the sister to Headteacher Christina (Camp 1). It is reported that the announcement insinuated to the pupils that although Headteacher Christina had been transferred from the school, their beloved Teacher Beaton was also on transfer, and that the pupils could follow him to his new school if they so wished. This angered the pupils and two versions of events that followed are presented in the narratives below:

Narrative 1: Following the assembly, the Standard 8 pupils regrouped in their classroom (allegedly Teacher Beaton was in the classroom) and afterwards went to the Headteacher's office to demand that the transfers be cancelled. However, they were not given a chance to be heard. Instead, the Deputy Head shouted at them for making noise. It is alleged that to disperse the pupils, the Deputy Head took a stone and threw it at a pupil, which sparked a reaction from the rest who started throwing stones in retaliation.

Narrative 2: The provocative manner of the announcement of the transfers drew a reaction from the pupils who jeered at the teacher. This angered her and having pinpointed one pupil that insulted her, she threw a stone at the pupil. This sparked a reaction from the rest of the pupils who retaliated by throwing stones at teachers and school buildings.

6.2. Causes of the conflict leading to the riots

This segment presents the findings following the research questions. The first part considers the question of "Why did the pupils riot?". This part is presented

thematically using thick description and direct quotes from participants. Inductively, three main themes came up in the analysis, namely: situation and conditions at "Maula"; management style; and the personal attitude of the headteacher.

6.2.1. Situation and conditions at "Maula"

The study found that Nachiswe Primary School had earned itself the unenviable name of "Maula" because of its remote location and the apparent nature of the teachers that used to be posted there. Maula is a maximum-security prison in the capital city, Lilongwe, where notorious convicts are incarcerated. Nachiswe Primary School was called "Maula" because teachers who allegedly committed offences in their previous schools would be sent there as a form of punishment. It should be recalled that due to its remote location, Nachiswe Primary School faced the challenge of teacher shortage, as most teachers were reluctant to work there. At the time of data collection, the school had a teacher to pupil ratio of 1:149. It is also worth recalling that due to the centralised and bureaucratic nature of resolving discipline cases by the Teaching Service Commission, most education managers preferred internal means of punishment for offending teachers. The most common form of punishment was to transfer troublesome teachers to remote schools such as Nachiswe Primary School.

The study established that Nachiswe Primary School, indeed, had several teachers who had allegedly committed offences in their previous schools. For example, Teacher Beaton had been a deputy headteacher at two schools prior to his transfer to Nachiswe Primary School. He was removed from that position and sent to Nachiswe after allegedly getting involved in the theft of maize flour meant for the pupils' school feeding programme. When asked why he was removed from the position of deputy headteacher and sent to Nachiswe school, he responded that:

> [It was] very unfortunate that there was a certain incident which happened at Mphasa [school]… concerning... *Mary's Meals* flour. It was discovered at a certain time that flour was stolen from the stores. And because that …period, I was the one who was …distributing the flour to the... women who were cooking, I was told that, I was responsible for the loss of the flour. Because of that, I was... transferred from Mphasa to Nachiswe (Teacher Beaton).

Headteacher Christina described the school as a dumping ground for offending teachers. She cited names of teachers who had issues at their previous schools and ended up at Nachiswe Primary School; and referring to the teachers in Camp 2, she emphasized that "all the teachers had problems". This outcome agrees with the findings of the World Bank study in Malawi which stated that where improper teacher behaviour is reported, the offending teachers often get transferred to other schools (Ravishankar, et. al., 2016). The present study considers this kind of management as a recipe for trouble. Indeed, the collection of 'troublesome' teachers at Nachiswe School resulted in teacher frustration and demotivation.

The study noted that although management at the district level was aware of the problems at the school, it was unable to decisively deal with them due to contextual factors. The shortage of teachers at the school, its remoteness, and the challenge of getting good teachers to the school made it difficult for management to handle the situation conclusively. The DEM acknowledged this challenge and the levels of teacher frustration when she was asked why it had taken so long to deal with the problems decisively. She explained that:

> …teachers have been refusing to be posted there because it's in the peri-urban, so it is treated as a school which is in a remote area to an extent that there's a history which was also raised in their [teachers'] complaints to say, "You know the people who are found here are rejects! we are rejects! we are here for a punishment… when are you going to remove us from here?". (DEM)

The study, therefore, argues that the mounting frustration and the prevailing state of indecision provided an opportunity for teachers in Camp 2 to force action in their favour. Two options were available, with the first one being to have a headteacher of their choice who would manage the school in the way they would dictate. However, this option would look like convicts taking over Maula prison. It should, nevertheless, be recollected that at one point this option was tried by Camp 2 teachers whereby they declared themselves independent of the school administration. The second option was to demand that they be removed from the school. Considering that under prevailing conditions, the worst form of punishment for causing trouble would be to transfer them to another school, the conflict presented them with an opportunity to escape from Maula. In this case a transfer from Nachiswe Primary School would mean a release from incarceration at Maula which would look like getting rewarded for misconduct. It can, therefore, be argued that the collection of troublesome teachers at Nachiswe Primary School, the state of indecision by the district management, and the practice of transferring teachers as a form of punishment provided a fertile ground for deepening the conflict at the school.

6.2.2. Management style

The study established that the management style of Headteacher Christina contributed to the crisis at the school. Headteacher Christina can be described as a formidable manager who used to take a tough stand against teachers' unprofessional behavior. Two factors stood out regarding the management style. The first is that she used to make unpopular decisions which created a schism between her and some teachers, and the second is that she used to show favouritism in allocating responsibilities and "privileges".

Firstly, the study noted that Headteacher Christina did not shy away from making tough and unpopular decisions regardless of the perceived consequences. For instance, she elevated Teacher Thomas from the position of section head to fill the vacant position of first deputy headteacher, sidelining the second deputy headteacher who was considered as the most likely candidate. The second deputy head was

overlooked because of unprofessional behavior. Headteacher Christina described him as "lazy" and "not performing well" in his responsibilities, "reporting late for work and knocking off earlier than the required time". This decision was a turning point in the school as it created two main opposing forces to Headteacher Christina. The forces were the teachers in Camp 2 who sympathised with the overlooked second deputy headteacher, and the village chief who was his brother-in-law. It is alleged that, from that point, the second deputy headteacher used to work 'behind the scenes' to gang-up support and undermine the authority of Headteacher Christina. Explaining the origin of the two Camps at the school following the elevation of Teacher Thomas, Headteacher Christina said: "I was the headteacher, Teacher Thomas [was] the first deputy, then himself being the second deputy, he decided to gang up with other teachers. I had 5 teachers who were behind me and he had 9 teachers. So, the school was divided into two groups. (Headteacher Christina)."

The study, indeed, noted that Camp 2 teachers exhibited unprofessional behavior. The tough stand by Headteacher Christina might have been taken in an effort to curb these unprofessional practices. For example, the headteacher had developed a routine practice of calling for a staff meeting every morning to talk to teachers about any issues she felt were pertinent for that day. During these meetings, she would admonish teachers that had reported late for work, or had no lesson plans. If a teacher had no lesson plans, he would not be allowed in class until he prepared and showed them to her. This practice annoyed teachers who felt that it was a waste of valuable class time. This issue came up as one of the grievances against Headteacher Christina. Commenting on the outcome of investigations by the District Education Office, the DEM explained that "to me what was cited, which we could actually see that could be a weakness, is where they complained that the headteacher is full of morning caucuses where they are gathered on a daily basis and …are reprimanded on whatever… when the mood is for them to go and teach" (DEM).

Secondly, Headteacher Christina was accused of favouritism in allocating responsibilities. It was observed that Camp 2 teachers were overlooked in favour of Camp 1 teachers. Besides the elevation of Teacher Thomas, other key positions such as that of School Health and Nutrition Coordinator were allocated to Camp 1 teachers. Explaining the grievances raised by teachers, the DEM said:

> …one of the complaints …raised …was that the headteacher was favouring …the sister in terms of opportunities. In terms of whether it's an opportunity for a CPD [Continuous Professional Development], an opportunity to be a School Health and Nutrition teacher, which is involved in the distribution of *Mary's Meals* to the volunteers; so that in the schools it's felt like it's …a privilege. (DEM)

It should be recalled that the position of School Health and Nutrition Coordinator is the one that had landed Teacher Beaton in problems at his previous school. Similarly, Camp 1 teachers would also be favoured for CPD workshops taking place outside the school. It should be stated that besides allowing teachers to update their knowledge

and skills, CPD workshops had the added advantage of allowing teachers to earn extra income that would supplement their salaries. The income would be in the form of upkeep allowances. In a setting where teachers' salaries are meagre, attending a CPD workshop could be considered a big privilege and, therefore, the choice of a teacher to attend could be contentious. Explaining the favouritism and how it created further divisions among teachers, Teacher Kingsley said:

> So, there were some practices which were not pleasing members of staff like biases. [For] most of the things that were happening here, the name that was mentioned was Teacher Thomas only. If there is a... workshop out there, Teacher Thomas was the one sent to that workshop. So, Teacher Thomas and the headteacher… were on good terms but not with the rest of the members of staff (Teacher Kingsley).

Considering the undercurrents to undermine Headteacher Christina's leadership by Camp 2 teachers, the practice by the headteacher of assigning responsibilities to the teachers she trusted could be well understood. However, the practice widened the gap between Camp 1 teachers who could be considered as a privileged group with access to power, and Camp 2 teachers who were aggrieved. It can, therefore, be argued that for Camp 2 teachers, such practices would be a source of cohesion and naturally strengthen their resolve to act with one voice in search of a desired outcome.

6.2.3. Personal attitude of the headteacher

The study established that the attitude of Headteacher Christina created a further rift between her on the one hand and teachers, pupils, parents, and the community on the other hand. The study participants considered Headteacher Christina as "insulting", "unsympathetic to teachers' problems", and "boastful". The study noted that in an effort to correct teachers' and pupils' untoward behaviour, she ended up offending them because she would either use her family as a model of achievement, or use members of the community as examples of people encountering problems because they neglected education. Pupils attributed the divisions among teachers to the headteacher's attitude. In a focus group discussion (FGD), they cited cases where Headteacher Christina was insulting and boastful. The following excerpts capture the conversation:

Interviewer: When you say the headteacher would shout at pupils and teachers in an undignified manner, can you please provide an example?

PUPIL 3: She once shouted at a teacher. A teacher was seeking permission to take care of her daughter who was in hospital, so she wanted to take care of her as a guardian. So, the headteacher said "How can a person like you who has AIDS look after a patient?" So, the teacher got out of the headteacher's office while crying, and when other teachers inquired "What is wrong?" she did not respond, but just left for her home – that is her house *(pointing).*

PUPIL 4: All the times she would get in class, she would not teach but be boasting, praising herself and insulting our parents that they are uneducated.

Interviewer: Can you give one example?

PUPIL 4: She would say "Your parents are uneducated, they dropped out of school, their occupation is working in other people's gardens. All my children are educated… one of them is an accountant, another one is a graduate"… a lot of self-praise.

PUPIL 8: It's true she does that. There is also another teacher who left this school because she was insulted that she is saturated with ARVs [Anti-Retroviral drugs]. It's really true about her child… we stay close to her and her last-born child has just completed his education, so she says that in this village there are dull children, so she wants to make us intelligent, but instead of just advising us, she insults us…

PUPIL 2: (Laughing) …she is so insulting. She says that "Some of you use mosquito nets at night as a blanket while my blanket was imported from Johannesburg" *(laughs).*

PUPIL 6: (Laughs) She says that she meets a lot of women that she had taught right here, carrying sacks of vegetables on their heads… So when people had a strike [referring to Camp 2 teachers], she kept on insulting that even if pupils do not learn, it's none of her business because she is already educated and her children are also well educated.

The findings from the FGD were corroborated by interviews and documentary evidence. For example, the letter that Camp 2 teachers wrote asking for transfer from Nachiswe Primary School accused Headteacher Christina of using abusive language, insulting teachers in the presence of community members, addressing weaknesses of teachers in the presence of pupils, and revealing to members of staff information shared to her in confidence. In addition, a report written by PEAs to the District Education Office carried a recommendation that Headteacher Christina should control her temper as she was fond of using abusive language when she was angry. Similarly, minutes of the meeting held at the school way back on 21st January, 2015 accused Headteacher Christina of calling teachers "rejects" who had been chased away from other schools. This attitude, coupled with the autocratic form of leadership, could not inspire any hope for the teachers. This created a frustrated group of teachers who easily conspired to make the school ungovernable. In addition, her attitude swayed the opinions of pupils and community members against her, hence they sided with Camp 2 teachers in the conflict.

As it can be noted, the cause of the conflict was complex as several factors came into play. It can, therefore, be argued that the riots were caused by a complex set of factors ranging from systemic to school level. At system level, the study argues that the centralization in handling teacher discipline and the massive shortage of teachers did not provide any motivation for the District Education Office to report cases of teacher indiscipline. Instead, availability of cases of teacher indiscipline provided

opportunities for the District Education Office to allocate teachers to schools located in hard to reach areas such as Nachiswe. With this practice, schools located in disadvantaged areas such as Nachiswe Primary School could get teachers who were not only troublesome, but were also frustrated. The concentration of troublesome and frustrated teachers at Nachiswe Primary School, and the lack of effective consequences for teacher misbehavior provided the drive for the teachers to mount resistance against a tough, formidable and 'unsympathetic' headteacher. A combination of all these factors at Nachiswe Primary School created a state of conflict which just required a spark to be manifested. The transfer of Teacher Beaton and how it was handled hence provided the spark.

6.3. How pupils organised to stage the riots

The preceding section has demonstrated that Nachiswe Primary School was in a state of conflict awaiting a trigger event. This section, therefore, uses data that has been presented in the chronological structure to respond to the question of how pupils organised to stage the riots. The data in the chronological structure presented the announcement of Teacher Beaton's transfer as the spark event. Two narratives in the chronological structure explain the chain of events following this announcement. It should be acknowledged that the state of conflict at the school made the situation amenable to pupil manipulation to provide the spark event. However, contrary to this observation, this paper argues that the rioting was a spontaneous action by the pupils following the announcement of the transfer of Teacher Beaton on the school assembly. The paper argues that the time between the announcement of the transfer and the rioting was not adequate to allow the pupils to get organized and plan for the riots. In all the two narratives presented in the chronology, the rioting was a result of provocation by a teacher on a situation that was already volatile.

It should, nevertheless, be acknowledged that with the opinions of most adults including class teachers, parents, and community members tilted against Headteacher Christina and Camp 1 teachers, and hence in favour of Camp 2 teachers, the circumstances might have had a subtle and unstated influence on the attitude of pupils and their consequent riotous actions. However, much as this subtle influence was very strong, it falls short of manipulation. The rioting was hence an act of pupil activism to claim their rights to '*self-determination'* following the failure of the school to provide for their *welfare*. It should further be maintained that the pupils' actions were legitimised by the prevailing public opinion in favour of Camp 2 teachers. The persistence of the conflict, the failure to decisively arrive at a solution, and the sidelining of the pupils could be considered as a failure to consider the *welfare* of the pupils. In an environment of massive competition for secondary education, Teacher Beaton was seen as a window of hope for the pupils and parents hence his transfer was seen as a massive blow. This is the reason why the pupils requested the cancellation of Teacher Beaton's transfer. Ruitenbery (2010) cautions against the closing of spaces for the expression of dissent. The paper maintains that it is the effort to mute the voice of the pupils that eventually led to violence.

6.4. *The aftermath of the riots*

The paper has so far noted that in the build-up to the riots, the voice of pupils had been silent. There was no consideration of pupil participation in meetings and other efforts to resolve the conflict before the riots occurred. It is only the riots that granted pupils visibility and made their voice heard. From the focus group discussion and interviews, the study learned that after the rioting, pupils took to the streets intending to march roughly the 17 km distance to the DEM's office to demand that the transfer of Teacher Beaton be rescinded. The pupils were, however, stopped in their tracks by the police. In addition, when the police got to Nachiswe Primary School, they carried out preliminary investigations and picked Teacher Beaton for questioning. When pupils heard that Teacher Beaton had been locked up, they marched to the police station to demand his release. They were, however, unable to meet him at the police station. Three days later, Teacher Beaton was tried in a court of law and eventually acquitted of the charges of inciting pupils to riot. At the time of data collection, only 1 teacher had been posted to Nachiswe Primary School following the removal of a total of 5 teachers. The Standard 8 pupils lamented this development as their class of 240 pupils had only Teacher Kingsley remaining. It should be noted that after the riots, apart from the investigation by the police, no effort was made administratively to investigate the pupils' actions. This could be due to the legitimisation of their actions and realisation that their actions were spontaneous, occasioned by the events that obtained at the school.

7.0. Young citizen activism or pupil manipulation? Concluding reflections

The study argues that the rioting by pupils at Nachiswe Primary School was an act of young citizen activism. This argument is advanced considering the broader context of primary education in Malawi, the narrow context of Nachiswe Primary School and the factors that took place in the build up to the conflict. The democratisation process that took place in Malawi in 1993 led to a drive towards decentralisation. The benefits of decentralisation of power to local levels such as district councils and schools are well articulated in literature (Rose, 2005; Evans and Rose, 2007; Bartnett, 2013; Porter, 2014; Yamada, 2014). It is argued that decentralisation leads to increased participation of stakeholders at local levels, improved decision making (Davies, Harber and Dzimadzi, 2003), and enhances the democratic attributes of community members (Rose, 2003). However, the decentralisation process in education was problematic. While power was devolved to local councils and local communities, central government held on to power in key areas such as teacher recruitment, remuneration, and teacher discipline. This created problems of accountability as local communities had no powers to hire and fire teachers. Under these circumstances, it can be argued that local communities would likely consider themselves as beneficiaries and not necessarily as active citizens who could demand accountability from service providers. A study by Davies, Harber and Dzimadzi (2003) on the decentralisation process in Malawi actually reported cases of conservatism by some powerful people at central office and some power dynamics at local levels hence

frustrating the process. Similarly, a study by Karlsson (2002) in South Africa noted that the decentralisation process did not empower local communities but rather led to the re-concentration of power in the hands of headteachers and teachers.

The present study noted that the bureaucratic nature of discipline cases made it less motivating for districts to report cases. As a result, internal discipline measures were employed. In an environment of high teacher shortage, internal discipline became an opportunity to fill vacancies existing in schools located in remote and hard to reach areas. This observation agrees with the World Bank study in Malawi which found that reported improper teacher behaviour often led to the offending teachers being transferred to other schools (Ravishankar, et. al., 2016). This paper maintains that the ambiguity between decentralisation and continued centralisation led to a state of indecisiveness which contributed to the events leading to the conflict at Nachiswe Primary School.

The study observed that the situation at Nachiswe Primary School was further complicated by family ties, and a formidable headteacher who was very tough in dealing with teacher misbehaviour. In addition, the headteacher's attitude created a situation which afforded the teachers an opportunity to escape from a punishing situation. A related study by Okitsu and Edwards (2017) in Zambia noted that systemic factors and the school context made it complicated to discipline teachers and demand accountability for services offered by schools. Therefore, this paper argues that several factors – a failed decentralisation process and the continued centralisation of power by the central government, massive shortage of teachers in the country, indecisiveness in handling teacher indiscipline at both district and school levels – all conspired and led to a state of paralysis at Nachiswe Primary School.

Conspicuously absent in the mix-up at the school was the pupil, who is the main stakeholder in education. All the efforts to resolve the conflict did not include pupils. Several studies have reported on the marginalisation of pupils and children in the decision-making space (Wyness, 1999; Jans, 2004; Wyness, Harrison and Buchanan, 2004; Torres-Harding, et al., 2018). The marginalisation of learners in the conflict, therefore, puts to question the widely acclaimed learner-centred approach adopted under the Outcome Based Education in Malawi. Ironically, this paper observed that there was an apparent pupils' *right to welfare* approach to the problem in the build-up to the conflict. The welfare approach privileges adults to make decisions in the interest of the pupils (Wyness, Harrison and Buchanan, 2004). Although the indecisiveness at the school was affecting pupils in a negative way, authorities claimed that this inaction was done in the interest of the pupils. It was feared that taking decisive action against the misbehaving teachers would deprive pupils of their right to education as they would have no teachers at all. The paper considers this approach as part of the politics of school governance whereby the availability of teachers in schools alone is seen as sufficient without considering their professionalism and effectiveness.

The last straw that broke the pupils' silence was the transfer of a teacher who had won their confidence. This action awakened the pupils' *right to self-determination* and

added their voice to the conflict. As Robinson and Taylor (2007) argue, voice (such as that of the pupils) does not only include the spoken voice, but also the many ways in which pupils may express their views about any aspect of their school experience. Therefore, the paper maintains that the rioting was a form of citizen activism by pupils who had been marginalised for so long. Jans (2004) points out the ambivalence between autonomy and regulation in child participation. He states that the element of protection allows child participation to take place in protected arenas such as child parliaments and student councils. As observed in this paper, there was lack of formal spaces for pupil participation in decision making at Nachiswe Primary School. As Ruitenberg (2010) cautions, the lack of spaces for expression of grievances means opening up new battlefields. Indeed, pupil regulation at Nachiswe Primary School denied authorities an opportunity to hear pupils' voice formally and also denied pupils the socialization into formal spaces and boundaries of acceptable participation. As a result, the building up of tension led to violent pupils' voice which brought them into confrontation with law enforcement agents. de Weerd, et al. (2002) describe this kind of pupils' voice as unconventional political participation which is a form of active citizenship that challenges elite status and contests established practices.

The study extends our understanding of causes of pupil activism, especially at primary level. The study has allowed us to understand that although cases of activism may be on the rise in Malawi, their causes may be linked to systemic factors such as decentralisation and its associated repercussions. In addition, systemic factors may also interact with unique local level and contextual factors which may conspire to create a state of paralysis, making it difficult to provide for the *welfare needs* of pupils.

Another important observation of the study is the sidelining of the pupils' voice in affairs that affect their education. The paper, therefore, recommends the creation of safe spaces in schools to hear authentic pupils' voice as part of learner-centred education and school democratisation. This, it should be acknowledged, is easier said than done, especially in Africa where culturally adult privilege overrides pupils' interests. However, democracy requires making tough decisions and tough choices, hence to reap the benefits of democracy, adults must be willing to move out of their comfort zone and authentically allow child interests to flourish.

8.0. References

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