

## MILITARIZATION OF EDUCATION: THE SCHOOL ASSEMBLY AS AN OBSTACLE TO HUMAN RIGHTS EDUCATION IN KENYA

By

**Brenda Sara Khanani**

**M.Ed Student**

**Department of Educational Foundations**

**University of Nairobi**

**P O Box 30197-00100**

**Nairobi**

**Kenya**

**E-mail: [brendadsarah@gmail.com](mailto:brendadsarah@gmail.com)**

**Telephone: +254712650505**

### **Abstract**

*Violations of basic individual freedom and rights and authoritarianism have remained familiar traits of majority of governments in Africa; and Kenya is not an exception. Educational systems in this regard can be effective in inculcating and fostering a culture of awareness of rights and responsibilities among populace. However, the organizational mode of the current education system in Kenya is lacking in promoting tolerance and democratic values. This paper examines the school assembly as a structure within the education system which inhibits creativity and responsibility thus posing a major challenge to quality. The assembly in this context is portrayed as authoritarian in nature. It operates on the premise that the best way to educate the youth is to reduce them to the level of docility. This inculcates fear in students and rewards blind obedience to authority. By making learning passive and unquestioning, the assembly produces passive and unquestioning citizens. The paper therefore demonstrates how the present school assembly is an obstacle to cultivation and promotion of democracy and human rights in Kenyan schools. An analysis of how the assembly is used to impose military type of discipline to learners is made to substantiate this view. Underlying this analysis is the suggestion that there is need to carry out a reform aimed at restructuring the assembly and using it as a tool for inculcating in learners respect for and protection of human rights and freedom and also a sense of responsibility. In this way, it is believed that the assembly will be making an important contribution in raising the quality of education.*

**Key Words:** Militarization, School assembly, Human Rights Education

### **1. Introduction**

One of the areas which have been raised about education is the concern about individual freedom and rights versus authoritarianism at the school level. Such concerns have prompted a call for greater responsiveness to respect for human rights, accountability and a two-way channel of information between students and the school administration. Educational systems in this regard have been cited as an effective way of inculcating and fostering a culture of awareness of rights and responsibilities among people.

The basic education act 2013, stresses the function of education as “encouraging independent and critical thinking; and cultivating skills for reconstruction and development” and also “Promoting respect for the right of the child’s opinion in matters that affect the child”. Recently, a new system of prefects, the students’ council, was introduced in Kenyan Schools. Article 27 of the Education Act, 1988 gives guidelines on the formation of students’ councils in post primary schools. The aim of these councils is to promote the interests of the school and the involvement of the students in the affairs of the school, in co-operation with the board, parents and teachers. The formation of the Kenya Secondary School Student Council (KSSSC) in 2009 was done with a view to making secondary school governance more participatory. In this new arrangement, students should be part and parcel of decision making to ensure their interests are adopted in the administration of schools. This system is intended to promote democracy and human rights in schools.

However, alongside an effective students’ council, the Kenyan school system requires other aggressive policies. Such policies are necessary to salvage it from some colonial tendencies that continue to encourage dependence and passivity rather than independence and responsibility. The way the assembly is organized and conducted inculcates fear in students and rewards blind obedience to authority. By making learning passive and unquestioning, this banking concept produces passive and unquestioning students. This paper demonstrates how the present school assembly is an obstacle to cultivation and promotion of democracy and human rights in Kenyan schools.

## **2. The School Assembly**

The current practice of the assembly in Kenyan schools dates back to the colonial times. This was in the 1920s and 1930s when the earliest schools for Africans were started in the country. As it has been argued before, the colonial state in Africa did not only need an “educated native” but a “loyal educated native” (Sifuna 2000). They were interested in inculcating within the “native populations” a proper respect for the European interpretation of “law and order” (Anderson, 1970). This was to be achieved through education based on religious teaching. As the official scheme of Development of African Education emphasized:

.....religious instruction and observance must, within the competence of established and accredited religious bodies, continue to be available for children of all parents who desire it (Mamdani 1976).

The British government therefore embraced missionary education because of its political usefulness.

The assembly was started by the Christian missionaries who also pioneered Western Education to Kenyan Africans. The purpose of the assembly then was to create a moment when all the students were gathered in one place for communication. The communication was mainly administrative, for maintaining law and order within the school. This was especially because the British colonialists were very much interested in producing Africans who were loyal to the existing order (Low and Pratt 1960). The assembly was therefore key in imparting values which included loyalty and self-sacrifice in the interest of the colonialist.

Today, an assembly is when the school community, or a part of it, meets together to share aspects of life that are of worth. It acts as a medium for communicating matters of significance from one generation to another. The assembly could also be used to give out academic awards.

It is a common habit in most parts of the world for schools to hold assemblies. Throughout China, each Monday students gather outdoors before school. They stand in formation while the headmaster addresses them over a loud speaker system. This commonly lasts for nearly an hour. In England, the assembly is usually in the main hall, and is used to inform the whole school of notices, and to have “whole school” lessons. Each and every student is also given an opportunity to address the assembly so that they may develop public speaking skills.

### **3. *The Importance of School Assemblies***

In Kenya, schools have been organizing assemblies since colonial times. Public and private schools all have moments when the whole school gathers for some reason. Some of these assemblies are carefully organized by the school authorities in conjunction with the students. A good number however are attended only as a matter of routine with no clear objective. Even though, what are the real aims and functions of the school assembly?

A high quality school assembly is one of the most important aspects of a school's curriculum. This curriculum refers to what the learners are exposed to and are expected to acquire in the process of schooling. Its potential to nurture a positive school ethos that stresses care for the self, others and the pursuit of all forms of excellence should not be underestimated. If an assembly is carefully planned by involving students in its organization, it nurtures the development of intrapersonal intelligence. Giving talks for example on varied subjects enables learners not only to acquire speaking skills but also develops their creativity and leadership skills. School assemblies in all phases of schooling, can make a positive contribution to learner self-development and therefore be at the heart of raising achievement and standards. A good assembly that has been developed by planning can encourage pupils to reflect upon a set of universal values such as love, peace, truth, co-operation, respect and responsibility. These values act as the foundation not only for the development of social, moral and cultural aspects of the curriculum, but also for a holistic life and citizenship.

A school explained the role and purpose of assembly in its documentation:

Our assemblies are an important feature of our school's life. They act as one of the main ways by which we create our positive reflective ethos and promote our values-based education. Assemblies contain times of quiet reflection that enable pupils to develop the deepest values and aspirations of the human spirit.

As the quote above exemplifies, assemblies should aim to create, nurture and sustain a sense of community. They can serve to develop a positive school ethos that affirms the school's identity and aspirations. The result being that the school lives in cohesive harmony that sustains the pursuit of excellence in all its forms. What should be demonstrated in an assembly is a reiteration of the value of each individual pupil including their individual thoughts and abilities. There should be a reiteration of the importance of those elements to the community and the secure place of each pupil within the school. Finally, at a subtle but powerful level, a reminder of the importance to each pupil and adult in the assembly of the school itself.

### **4. *Organization of the School Assembly in Kenya***

In Kenya, most schools hold their assemblies on Monday and Friday mornings between 7.00am and 8.00am after which students start their daily lessons. Some schools also hold assemblies at the middle of the week on Wednesdays. Monday morning assembly is particularly important, as it should bring the whole school back together again after the weekend break, to re-focus upon the week in view, on its objectives and the tools that will be used to achieve them. Other assemblies during the week build on the standards that are set at the beginning of the week. Schools develop their own pattern of assemblies that may include the whole school, certain stage for example year group or class assemblies. Also the time of assembly may vary with purpose.

The assembly is conducted with various activities. If academic results in the school are to be released, it is done here. In most schools, this happens in the mid week assemblies or special ones for such functions. During this activity, students who score high marks are recognized and awarded. Similarly, those who score lowly are singled out and cautioned. This caution varies from school to

school and ranges from humiliation before other students and teachers to punishment in the full glare of the whole school community.

General guidance and counseling also takes place on Kenyan school assemblies. This process is usually led by the teacher in charge of guidance in the school. During guidance sessions, students are helped to understand themselves, are guided on how to achieve their goals, how to cope with life issues that may be stressful among others things. It is a common habit during these sessions for students to be cautioned on bad habits and other harmful practices for example on the harmful effects of social media. Students who have participated in such unwanted habits may also be singled out to be used as examples to the rest.

Attendance of the assembly is compulsory for all students and teachers. Normally, it is the duty of the teacher in charge of the week, assisted by student leaders to identify and punish students who skip or those who are late on the assembly. Other teachers who don't attend assembly also face disciplinary action from the school principal.

These assemblies begin with the raising of the national flag and singing of the national anthem. This process is led by students who belong to the scouts' movement. When the flag is being raised, all the students and teachers on the assembly are expected to stand at attention as a sign of respect to the nation. Those who disobey this rule are punished. The national anthem promotes national consciousness and loyalty to the nation. There is also a strong emphasis on national unity and other duties of the citizen. After this, the scouts then lead the whole school in reciting the loyalty pledge. In the pledge, the students and teachers pledge their allegiance to the president and nation of Kenya. After the flag raising activity, it gets to a time of addressing the assembly and this starts with the student leaders. One student leader, normally the one assigned to be in charge of the week and the head student address others. In their address, they remind others about the school rules and regulations which must be followed. They then identify any students who disobeyed rules within that week. Such students' names are called out on the assembly and it is the discretion of the teacher on duty or the school principal to decide what punishment such students are to be given to serve as examples to the rest. When the teacher on duty's turn comes, the routine is more or less like the student leaders. The deputy principal and the principal are the last speakers on the assembly. All these speeches are geared to the same goal: obedience to school rules, daily routine and respect to authority.

A teacher on duty is also expected by the school authority to carry out a spot check on the dress code and cleanliness of the students on assembly. Students are expected to have on assembly, school uniform which is complete together with a tie. The uniform must also be clean and tidy. Those without this complete set are punished. Students who do not have school socks for example may be punished by taking away their shoes. When this is done, they go about their business in school bare feet and take their shoes in the evening. Students who are found dirty or untidy are singled out and may even be washed before others as punishment.

##### **5. *The School Assembly and Democracy, Human Rights Education***

In political context of western democracies, the term , democracy, has historically been associated with three but interrelated meanings. First, democracy means the sovereignty of people. The second meaning is that democracy is majority rule. Thirdly, democracy is seen as a rule of groups. (Benn and Peters, 1964). The European Council Resolution of 29<sup>th</sup> June, 1991 in its definition of democracy has listed, among other things, respect for human rights, the rule of law and the existence of political institutions which are effective, accountable and enjoy legitimacy (Hazel, 1992).

Dewey (1961) argues that while the spirit of democracy ought to govern the conduct of the society or the nation, it also ought to govern the relations of individuals in the home, the school and the community. He sees democracy as a system that could do justice to the wholeness and complexity of human experience and a system through which the methodology of intelligent inquiry could be applied to people's social life. Democracy is also linked to people's personality and consequently development of human beings as individuals. Democracy should also recognize that each individual has something to contribute and that chance and opportunity to make this contribution be made possible. Okullu (1974) echoes the above sentiments and even goes further when he says:

Democracy makes sure that government is based on the concept of the dignity and value of man. It makes sure that man does not cease to have his individuality and that he is not simply a tool in the hands of the leader whose prime concern is maintaining stability in society. The law in a democratic society is primarily designed to protect the individual and to place him at the center of things.

Democracy is generally related to human rights. Torney- Purta (1988) defines human rights as those entitlements which are basic to being human and are not connected to the accident of being born in a certain country or with the skin of a particular colour. She points out that there is a basic core of universally agreed concept of human rights as well as a collection of documents in which they are expressed. The concept of human rights itself can be divided into several forms as well. Basic rights deal with the dignity and worth of the person; civil and political rights with the right to participate in self government; and social, economic and cultural rights with such matters as the right to work, to maintain one's culture and language and receive adequate education (Taylor 1993).

The universal Declaration of human rights (United Nations 1948) states the basic rights and fundamental freedoms to which all human beings are entitled. Although different societies define rights in terms of their own historical experiences, their value systems, and the economic and political realities of the current era, it has, however, been acknowledged that universal Declaration of human rights (United Nations 1987) meets the criteria for being considered part of the customary law of nations, and that, as such, it is binding on all states, regardless of whether or not they had a voice in its adoption (Tarrow 1992).

The right to education as an, empowering and development instrument as articulated in the Universal Declaration of human Rights recognizes the intrinsic human value of education, underpinned by strong moral and legal foundations. From this perspective, education is also an indispensable means of unlocking and protecting other human rights by providing knowledge and skills that are required to secure economic well-being, good health, liberty and security (UNESCO, 2000). Either passed through formal or informal means, education virtues are important for social, economic and political development of any society (Okwach and Abagi, 2005).

Respect for human rights is not a genetically conditioned faculty. It is learned or acquired. This practice should therefore be taught within a society. Such behaviour belongs to the cultural patrimony of a people; where culture means what a person learns from his/her social environment. It refers to acquired knowledge about what is good and bad. This culture are values, attitudes and beliefs of a people. It is what directs behaviour and conduct in society. It is through it that individuals and groups learn to recognise, accept and respect established social institutions and practices. Therefore education and culture constitute fundamental foundations of democracy and human rights (Gitonga 1987).

Nurturing a culture that respects human rights in Africa, cannot be left to the whims of socio-economic change. There should be a conscious attempt through the education system to create new citizens (Sifuna 2000). In this process of political change, the importance of the attitudes of children need to be stressed. Children develop new conceptions of what kind of person they are. They adopt new rules for conduct and acquire loyalties to new ideas and groups (Anderson 1966). The school is therefore a vital agent for bringing about democratic change and respect for human rights.



The school assembly therefore should be used within a conscious effort, both specific content as well as process, to develop in students an awareness of their rights and responsibilities, to sensitize them to the rights of others, and to encourage responsible action to secure the rights of all (Tarrow 1992). It is important that the youth in Kenya are prepared for life in a democratic and pluralistic society. This is important because many ethnic groups are plagued by intolerance and violence. Democratic and human rights education is well suited to develop respect for the dignity of the individual and the rights of others, to promote tolerance and acceptance of difference and to strengthen respect for fundamental freedoms. As such the school assembly can be used to promote democratic and human rights education.

Democratic and human rights education is a key element of the human personality, building personal capacities and developing the attitudes, skills and knowledge which individuals and groups need to live in harmony in pluralistic societies. The significance of such teaching for society is underlined by the fact that democratic and human rights education can reach through the school out into the community in ways highly beneficial to both (Taylor,1993). School assemblies within the larger school organisations should therefore aim to empower young people to psychologically, socially, economically and politically take charge of their well being. They should enhance and nurture good governance, democracy and the rule of law for the benefit of every individual in the society regardless of gender, status, religion and physical ability.

#### **6. *The school assembly as an obstacle to Democracy and Human Rights Education***

In Kenya, much has been said about the idea of education for democracy and human rights. However, the organizational mode of school assemblies which was put forward by western education is essentially authoritarian in nature. The school assembly is so hierarchical and as such it is not the right setting for inculcating democratic values. The assembly is not just authoritarian but it also takes the form of bureaucracy, the dominant mode of organization in modern industrial society. Dreeban (1968) argues that it is the school which provides the child with his or her first experience of the norms of bureaucratic behaviour associated with the modern work place. He suggests that the school contributes to the learning norms of universalism as children become members of categories such as years, classes, and houses and that individuals do not warrant special treatment in the application of rules. The organisation of the assembly in Kenyan schools inculcates not just bureaucratic behaviour but is also modelled on the classroom where activity falls “along rigidly authoritarian lines, designed to kill initiative and independent thought” (Cunningham 2006). The classroom teaching methods do not underline dialogue and rationality but emphasize the “banking” concept of education where the teacher is the active depositor and the learner is the passive one. This system is not compatible with democracy.

The assembly in schools enforces values which are needed for the efficient functioning of bureaucratic organizations and the maintenance of social order – obedience, abiding by the rules, loyalty, respect for authority, quietness, working to a strict timetable, tolerance of monotony and ignoring of personal needs when these are not relevant to the task at hand. These are colonial features mainly adopted from colonial models.

Dudley (1973) has criticized colonial rule in Africa for not promoting the tolerant and participant political values required in a parliamentary democracy. The assembly, through its authoritarian structure, encourages unquestioning acquiescence to authority. The British government embraced missionary education because of its political and ideological usefulness since it imparted skills such as reading, writing and arithmetic as well as values which included loyalty to the existing order and disciplined self-sacrifice in the interest of that order. Lord Lugard was clear in his appreciation of this in a discussion of the education of the sons of Fulani Chiefs in Nigeria:

I hope that they would thus be taught not merely to read and write but to acquire an English public schoolboy's ideas of honour, loyalty, and above all responsibility. It is by such means that I hope the next generation of Fulani rulers may become really efficient, reliable and honest in cooperation with the British in the administration of the Protectorate (Low and Pratt 1960).

It is no wonder then that the military type of discipline was considered a necessary aspect of training Africans:

To the African primitive state, military or semi-military discipline makes a strong appeal. No better example can be found than the discipline of the military and police forces of the colony which has been adopted in government schools (Education Department 1926).

It is this military type of discipline that was inherited by and still continues to control the assemblies in our Kenyan schools up to today.

The emphasis in most African educational institutions on blind obedience to school authorities through school assemblies had a colonial base. This created unidirectional flow of orders and communication and provided no corresponding channels for the students to communicate with the authority.

In Kenyan schools today, the assembly is an avenue for inculcating this blind obedience to rules and the unquestioning attitude. In most cases the school principle through the other teachers will spell out rules which must be followed irrespective of their infringement on human rights. The assembly as a bureaucratic organization proceeds on the basis of written rules. The duty of the student to obey the rules is constantly stressed. Students rights are very much a minor concern. Since the organizational mode of most schools tend towards a model of authoritarian bureaucracy, these school rules just as other decisions are made by a few people at the top of the hierarchy and are executed down the chain of command. This mode is very authoritarian. The assemblies are very much teacher centred with little student participation. The overall result is an experience that encourages dependance and passivity rather than independence and self discipline.

Attendance of these assemblies in itself is an epitome of just how far they (assemblies) can go as concerns education and rights of the students and even teachers. This usually is by obligation and not by choice. It is a common trend for teachers to often appear at the assembly ground, not because they are participating in the process and neither because they have any interest in what is happening on the parades, but because failure to appear may warrant a warning and a disciplinary action against the said teacher. If the teachers who are vested to transmit values of democracy and respect for human rights to the young generation are themselves guided by the tenets of dependance and blind obedience, then to what extent can the society expect them to deliver?

With regard to the dress code at the assemblies, the military type is emphasised. It is an obligation of the teacher on duty on every assembly to do a spot check on the manner of dressing and cleanliness of the students. Not that the training of learners in cleanliness and hygiene matters is not of importance, but the manner in which those found unclean are handled is what contravenes human rights. Scenes of a dirty student being marched to the front and being humiliated in the presence of the whole school are tolerated on some assemblies. This is normally done as a form of punishment to deter unhygienic tendencies. In as much as personal hygiene and responsibility are desired qualities, going to this extent in the name of training is a serious contravention of the rights of the learners.

In the same vein, it is common for teachers to confiscate shoes of students on assemblies if they are found to be dirty. The owners of those shoes then go about on bare feet for the whole day as punishment. In one school, boys who were seen going about their business in the school on bare chests reported that their school shirts had been taken away because they were not tacked in the

trousers on assembly. These few examples give the picture of how far the school assembly can get as an obstacle to human rights education in our schools.

Humiliation of students on school assemblies takes on different forms. In one case, a school girl aged fifteen was humiliated when teachers used a picture of her in a bikini on the assembly. Teachers took the image from her facebook page and used it to demonstrate the dangers of social networking. A blown up version of the snapshot was shown to all other students on the school's assembly. This left the girl in tears. Such humiliation of learners in the name of correcting behaviour is a form of infringing on their human rights. Many students who are humiliated on assemblies lack avenues of communicating their frustration due to the authoritarian model of schools.

Many schools release their internal and even external examinations on their assemblies. A common trend during this exercise is the humiliation and even punishment of the learners who score low marks. The exercise which aims at producing high school meanscores is usually a part of the rote learning and banking concepts. This is especially so since teachers emphasise production of correct answers for high grades at the expense of understanding the concept being tested. Therefore, learners who cannot produce the correct answers after a series of repeated exercises are subjected to humiliation on the school assemblies. This exercise which is a violation of learners human rights has also led to school dropout cases. Some students who are not intellectually gifted opt to stay away from school in order to avoid humiliation on the assembly every time results are released.

Students who contravene the laid down school rules and regulations are regularly punished on the school assemblies. This is mainly considered as a form of deterrence of unwanted behavior. Whereas it is difficult to deny that those dealing with adolescents have a case to make for reform as a reason for punishment than the adult level, we cannot yet justify punishment in the form of inflicting pain on the learners especially when this is done on the assembly, in the glare of the whole student and teacher population. Though many adolescents tend to live in a world of fantasy and thus tend to be mischievous, we cannot use such to justify punishment on the school assembly as the only open means for bringing them to their senses.

Peters (1969), being doubtful about the effect of punishment in school asserts that: "the truth of the matter is that punishment in school is at best a necessary nuisance". It may be necessary because of its "deterrent effect", but its positive educational value is dubious. Since punishment is associated with estrangement, its negative effect on free learning atmosphere has always been noticed in terms of development of hostility to the learner. Ogeno (1996) argues that in line with democracy, where freedom and justice are upheld, punishment in school denies pupils freedom by attempting to restrain their free expression. It does not respect the uncompromising principle of liberty. Whatever justification for punishment as a form of discipline, the liberty of learners should be guaranteed. It is a right of a learner to be treated fairly and not to be humiliated on the school assembly in the name of discipline.

The content in the Kenyan school assemblies lays emphasis on the role of the school in promoting national consciousness and loyalty through the manipulation of national symbols such as the flag, the loyalty pledge and the national anthem. The effects of these patterns of socialisation is that the educated – predominantly from the school system – define their citizenship in relation to their duties but not their social rights. This analysis has been supported overwhelmingly by a good number of studies. Koff and Van Der Muhll (1971) found out that in East Africa, pupils regarded the most important purpose of schooling as the creation of good citizens and obedience to authority. This attribute is basically a passive orientation. In northern Nigeria, students heavily stressed duties over and above rights in terms of what constituted a good Nigerian citizen (Haber 1989).



Whatever its rationale and whatever its justification, it is important to note that the existing organizational structure of the school assembly in Kenya is simply not capable of enhancing democracy because it contradicts the very principles on which democracy is founded. The continued use of the assembly in its current form contradicts the country's declared intentions of a democratic society. If democracy is the eventual aim and if it is the case that those with more education are more likely to participate in politics, then more emphasis on rights would be desirable among the educated Kenyans. A greater concern with political rights is however not a likely outcome of the present assembly in schools. The sooner the organization of the school assembly is looked into the better for the creation of an environment that respects human rights.

## 7. Conclusion

Kenya's current organization of the school assembly is formulated along authoritarian lines and demonstrates lack of respect for human rights. If the assembly and by extension the school is to successfully promote democracy and human rights, it must reorganize its structure. The school must show faith in democracy by organizing and running the assembly along democratic lines. Students must be encouraged to participate fully in the management of the assemblies. Their democratic rights must be clearly explained and respected by authorities. The students in turn must embrace the responsibilities that go with these rights. They must be taught to respect evidence and truth. They must learn to tolerate the values of others and exercise the freedom to make their own choices.

It must be recognized that democracy and respect for human rights is a matter of practice, not theory. The best way to teach learners to be democratic is to allow them to practise democracy. Nothing militates against democracy more than an educational practice which fails to offer opportunities for the analysis and debate of problems for genuine participation. In democracy, students learn best by doing.

The practice of discipline as carried out on the assemblies should be in terms of the freedom of the individual learner. This is what justice and fairness advocates. This can be made possible with the interest of the learners at heart. They should be participants in the initial organization of their assembly. With a clear understanding of the concept of discipline, teachers would refrain from punishment on the assembly.

The educational management style should adopt a sense of authority and responsibility that has respect for the subject human being of whatever age. Such a sense of authority and responsibility should always be to the advantage of the learner and should respect the principles of democracy.

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