

Nurturing Deliberative Democratic Citizenship: A Study of Public Secondary Schools in Eastern Malawi

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The purpose of this survey was to explore students' perceptions about school governance practices and their attitudes towards participatory and deliberative decision making as a citizenship practice in a democracy. Data was collected from a stratified random sample of 332 students from 17 public secondary schools, representing national, district, and government day and community day secondary schools in eastern Malawi. The final sample represents 83% of the original sample due to challenges in accessing students, as the study coincided with the students' preparing and sitting for final examinations. Questionnaires that focused on opportunities for participatory governance in schools as well as students' attitudes toward participatory and deliberative decision-making were administered to students. Descriptive statistics were used to explore and analyze the data.



Govt. day school students filling out questionnaires



National school students filling out questionnaires

This study found, among other issues, that students generally preferred participation and deliberation in decision-making practices in their schools, particularly where decisions directly affected them. Students felt that democratic deliberation should give equal value to all opinions without individual statuses unduly influencing the outcomes of the process. However, students could not reconcile this belief with the role of seniority in decision making; they expressed the need to listen to views based on the seniority of the speakers. A possible explanation for this could be the impact of cultural beliefs about seniority-based deference that students are accustomed to and that they find it hard to reconcile this with the notion of there being equality of opinions in democratic deliberation. Further, it was found that schools rarely provide opportunities for student involvement in any significant decision-

making processes. Students are hardly consulted or given space to make their voices heard or accommodated in school decision-making processes. Students are generally on the receiving end of most school decisions. These findings suggest poor attitudes towards student involvement and participation in decision making in the schools. This situation may affect the acceptability among students of some school decisions leading to misunderstandings that may result in students reactions such as protests in the schools. This study's findings indicate the need for an in-depth study to ascertain why school authorities do not provide for student involvement in decision making, as both a democratic requirement and a means of developing the students' capacities for democratic participation.



One of the national secondary schools



One of the community day secondary schools