

Boarding Schools as Perpetrators of Students' Behaviour Problems

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ABSTRACT This paper examined and discussed the nature of problems boarding schools in Botswana experience. The focus was on the boys' side of boarding. The paper argued that if the recreational facilities in boarding schools were not provided in sufficient quantities, students would seek other means which are not necessarily approved by school rules to keep themselves from boredom. Equally contributing to students' behaviour problem in boarding institutions is the multicultural composition of boarding students and the general poor calibre of boarding staff that have a duty of care to the students under their stewardship. The poor conditions at boarding schools and lack of close supervision, the paper concludes, encourage students to misbehave.

The behaviour of students in secondary schools in Botswana is a growing concern among the schools and society generally. Cases frequently cited in the media and other reliable sources suggest that boys at boarding schools are the chief perpetrators of the problem. Although such incidents have also been reported in both the day and boarding schools where the girls have also been involved, this paper focuses on the nature and causes of behaviour problems on the boys' side of boarding, where most behaviour problems have been reported. The paper examines the problem from the point of view of the researcher and not from an empirical perspective *per se*, where data are systematically collected, analysed and discussed. The researcher's critique of the situation in boarding schools is, however, supported by factual information obtained from the schools and the Ministry of Education. Such information pertains to the number of boy boarders in those schools; the type and the adequacy of the recreational facilities offered; the criteria used to recruit boarding personnel; and the conditions of service for boarding staff. Four issues, which according to the researcher are important to the problems experienced at boarding schools, form the basis of this paper. The problems are, but not limited to:

- (i) The multicultural composition of boarding students;
- (ii) Poor recreational facilities;
- (iii) The recruiting system of boarding staff; and
- (iv) The number of boarders versus the number of the boarding staff.

CONCEPTUALIZATION

The mention of students' discipline problems to many people in the educational context brings to mind the notion of violence in schools; alcohol and drug indulgence; lesson interruptions; poor performance; stress to teachers and school authorities; and physical abuse to other students. Schools, once regarded as places of comfort, safe learning, and socialization, are increasingly becoming places in society of youth anti-social behaviour. Students have lost respect to authority, to their peers and to themselves. They also pay less value to the resources that support their learning. Schools are gradually developing into places where students, through peer influence, indulge in alcohol, drugs and all sorts of anti-social behaviour (Moswela, 2004). There is little that can be disagreed with about the effects of students' behaviour problems on others in schools. Peer victimization can cause hurt, humiliation, and ridicule and these can adversely impact on the performance of the victim (McManus, 1995; Rigby, 1996). In more extreme cases as would be noted in the next paragraph, such behaviour has resulted in the occurrence of deaths.

In the USA, as a result of the escalating rate of crime by school youth, "metal detectors, uniforms, gates, bars, locks, video surveillance, armed security and police presence have become the norm" (Mosca and Hollister, 2004:2). The occurrence of such incidents in the USA is reported even in day schools. In the UK, though not reported on boarding schools, students'

discipline has recently become a topical and political issue once more. In her television address to the nation on the subject, the Education Secretary declared a zero tolerance for students' misbehaviour stating: "Any poor behaviour is too much and should not be tolerated. We need to draw the line on what is acceptable". These concerns coming in the wake of what she described as the biggest behaviour problems already under way, need an early intervention, which means helping the schools (<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/main.jhtml=news/2005/02/01/uskool.xml>).

In Botswana, although discipline problems are every school's concern, a growing body of data suggests that such incidents are more prevalent in boarding schools and are perpetrated by the boys more than the girls. Labels such as: "School of anarchy" (The Midweek Sun, 2004:1), "School of suicide" (The Botswana Gazette, 2004:1) are steadily becoming a common feature in Botswana secondary schools because of wayward students' behaviour. In a more recent incident, boys were suspended from attendance at a boarding senior secondary school for bullying the junior students (The Botswana Gazette, 2004). Not long ago nine students died at a boarding school after drinking methanol, a highly toxic chemical (Mmegi, 2003). These incidents and more others have made boarding schools, more than day schools, unsafe places for students. According to Cottle (2004) not only are students physically and verbally abused by others in ways that are life threatening, they are abused in much more subtle ways which can be even more disturbing because it can be so difficult to identify, and more difficult yet to stop and even sometimes dismiss it as just kids stuff.

Multicultural Composition of Boarding Students

This section describes and discusses the behaviour of students in its social setting, where their interaction with each other is very frequent. Boarding schools in Botswana accommodate mainly students whose homes are more than 10 km away from the school that they attend (Botswana, Republic of, 1998). Most of the boarding schools are located in a village and because the majority of students from the village at which the school is situated are within the 10

km distance, boarding students, invariably, would come from outside the village. Some may even come from as far as beyond 300 km. As students admitted in these schools come from different cultural, ethnic and even economic backgrounds, boarding schools in Botswana can be described as pluralistic institutions. In such heterogeneous groups, one group may claim dominance and superiority over the other(s) and if resisted, this can lead to serious conflicts. This is quite common and normal particularly where young people stay together as a group on a more permanent basis at a place such as a school hostel. Seniority or dominance could be claimed on the basis of who arrived first in the school or on the basis of age or even on economic backgrounds. Influence over others can manifest itself through aggressiveness, coercion, and outright force (Cottle, 2004).

Power established using the criteria of who arrived first or who is older or more affluent can equally be resisted and reciprocated using similar means because those who claim to be more senior, in whatever way, are not necessarily the physically strongest. Skirmishes triggered by such divisions have previously occurred in boarding schools. When trouble ensued at a boarding school in Botswana in 1994 between boarders, ethnicity was partly the reason. Boarding schools' cultures therefore tend to be competitive than cooperative and where this happens as (Rozycki, 2004:9) noted: "Power tends to flow to those who are strong and aggressive". The weak tend to be exposed to the confrontation and abuses at the hands of their peers, further noted (McManus, 1995).

Poor Recreational Facilities

Curtis and O'Hagan (2003:110) wrote that: "Activities that are seen as the opposite of work have been described as a form of time wasting when students were engaged in trifling activities as a break to their normal routines". They further wrote: "The old adage recognizes that play has some value to the lives of adults and children, and young children in particular" (ibid). In the context of play as a refreshing activity, the perspective by the two authors above cannot be truer at boarding schools in Botswana. The issue of boredom, a potential cause of mischievous behaviour by students (McManus, 1995), at school hostels has tended to receive little or

escaped the attention of those who investigate cases on misconduct in schools. This omission has often resulted in school authorities meting out punishment to offenders basing only on the offense and overlooking the cause.

As the rhetoric usually goes; "All work and no play made John a dull boy". People need to relax and refresh after work. Young people more than the elderly, like to refresh through play that involves moving about in a lively manner (Curtis and O'Hagan, 2003). This is necessary particularly after a long week of attending lessons. Facilities provided at boarding schools in Botswana are very poor. Popular music and ball sports are the main (if not the only) forms of recreational means for students in boarding schools. School heads or deputies who were contacted through the phone have described the recreational facilities in their schools as "appallingly inadequate", "will never be adequate", and "almost non-existence". At boarding schools, as would be expected, there are rules and regulations that regulate students' behaviour and movement beyond the premises. This means that for most of the time, students are kept within the school compound bored with little to keep their minds actively engaged. Boarding institutions therefore are generally boring places. Students have often referred to them as "concentration camps" or "prisons". The temptation for students to jump or damage the fence surrounding them in pursuit of whatever source of entertainment outside the school becomes very high in the circumstances. Students who would not under normal circumstances indulge in vices such as drinking and smoking picked up and got accustomed to such habits at boarding schools because of idleness and boredom.

It is not being suggested here that government must spend lavishly on recreational facilities. The supply can never be adequate anyway, as noted by one school head. Rather, the argument is that such facilities must be adequately provided in a fairly spread variety. Once provided, it is important that they are well looked after and maintained so that even future students could also benefit. The latter statement has implication for a well-organized and dedicated boarding staff, a quality that is sadly missing in boarding schools.

The Recruiting System of Boarding Staff

The job of a boarding master can be very

demanding. It needs a lot of resolve and preparedness on the part of the incumbent because of the challenges and problems presented by students. The recruiting process, if properly done, can influence behaviour at boarding houses. Well designed recruiting programmes can result in greater employee commitment, higher productivity, and higher quality of supervision (Casterter, 1992). An unplanned and desperate approach to recruitment, on the other hand, can be costly to schools because it can result in the engagement of desperate recruits who are looking for a job but not necessarily committed to it.

Until about the 1980s, boarding staff were recruited from a group of retired primary school head teachers and deputies. Since these officers were already receiving a pension, the salary attached to the job though low, was not a concern because it consolidated their net take home pension proceeds. Students' discipline was not so much of a problem because it was under the care of happy and committed officers. Information from a few consulted heads of schools and from the Department of Secondary Education indicates that the recruiting system for boarding staff is now different in three distinct ways.

Firstly, the advertisement targets serving teachers, nurses and social workers irrespective of their current level. The new requirement now excludes the crucial element of experience. Secondly, the conditions of service are not good enough to attract more experienced and capable candidates. The salary attached to the post is at Grade C4 which is much lower than what head teachers and deputies of primary schools and senior nurses and senior social workers get but higher than that of the junior workers in the respective fields. Although the post is open to nurses and social workers, it is dominated by teachers who have stagnated in their job because of non-performance. To expect already demotivated officers to be good role models, who can provide effective stewardship to young people in a boarding setting, is to underestimate the inherent challenges and problems boarding institutions face.

Thirdly, the post does not offer a progression structure except that there is an annual increment. Ginsberg and Keys (1995) have argued that the perceived probability of progressing in a job that would come with a reward can encourage an employee to put in more effort in their work.

Hanson (2003) adds that a job that promises no upward mobility can encourage tardiness among workers. The unattractive package for boarding staff in Botswana secondary schools has done just that and has resulted in high turnover of boarding staff. Some get dismissed for non-performance and some simply leave because they cannot cope. A more attractive package would be one that is directed toward placing and keeping suitably qualified and satisfied individuals in the position. That is, one that targets people who have good track records in dealing with large groups of students and who have impeccable interpersonal relationships because the job needs someone who can effectively coordinate the students' boarding and the academic activities of the school. Improved conditions of service including a much enhanced and competitive salary package would attract more serious personnel into the boarding staff cadre.

The Number of Boarders Versus the Number of Boarding Staff

The problem of students' supervision in a boarding environment is aggravated by the fact that only one person is responsible to a large number of students. If teachers can experience enough problems with relatively fewer students in a more formalized classroom setting, then boarding personnel, having to deal with much larger numbers in a less formal setting, on weekends for that matter when students are in a 'weekend mood', are faced with real problems. Evidence obtained from eleven out of the twenty seven boarding senior secondary schools in Botswana suggests that most of the schools have between 300 and 500 boy boarders who are under the supervision of only one boarding master. Schools such as Moeng College and Moeding College have each more than 600 boy boarders. Given the large students' numbers boarding personnel have to contend with, mischievous acts can escape even the most vigilant eye of the boarding master. This situation has encouraged the development of clandestine or surreptitious methods of absconding from the hostels even at night among students. A school head reported that each time a certain group of students planned to go out at night they would arrange their bedding in such a way that it would appear there is a person under the blankets.

In another example, a boy would put on ragged clothes and a tattered hat to disguise as

an old man each time he absconded into the village. Immediately after supper time, he would drive some goats which were regular scavengers on the kitchen leftovers. He would eventually end up in the village and would come back at the end of evening studies towards bed time. It took the boarding staff sometime before they could realize that the "old man" was actually their student. It was only after the goats had destroyed the matron's flowers that the boy was caught. As both the boarding master and the matron knew who 'the owner' of the goats was, they waited until he arrived at his usual time. To their shock, the man in rags was their student. These episodes are given to show the kind of tricks students can play on one person responsible to a large group.

A system of housemasters, which effectively worked in a boarding school in the 1970s, can help reduce the rate and even the gravity of occurrences to students' misdemeanors. Briefly, the system engaged as many teachers as they were houses at the students' hostels. Teachers took weekly turns to do the general boarding duties. The housemasters did not replace the boarding master. The latter performed his routine duties during the week as usual when teachers were teaching. Monetary incentives were attached to the extra responsibilities performed by the teachers. The advantage with the system was that teachers provided a more effective duty of care to the students, as the teacher/student ratio was smaller. This made it easier for teachers to know their students even by name and this improved relationships.

Most of the eleven schools contacted have recently introduced a year or house system where some selected teachers, work hand in hand with the boarding staff. This arrangement is, however, not very effective because the teachers are only engaged during the week and not at peak hours during weekends when boarders present more problems. Effective discipline, Petty (2001) has argued, is a group effort, not a responsibility of one person only. The behaviour of students in boarding schools is aggravated by the fact that for most of the time, students are on their own away from the influence and protection of their parents. Such situations favour opportunistic students (bullies) who threaten the free indulgence of others in education (West and Pennell, 2003). Peer influence can be so strong that whatever the child does, its behaviour is influenced by its social interaction with the other children. It is not the teacher or parent that the

child fears, only the peer group, Dreikurs, Grunwald and Pepper (1998).

CONCLUSION

The boys' section of the boarding department in secondary schools in Botswana is the most problematic. Four main factors that contribute to the problem of students' discipline have been identified as: First, the heterogeneity of the students' population that is in school hostels offers an opportunity for errant students to play games of power over others that involve aggression and violence. Second, because schools are under-provided in terms of recreational facilities, students have tended to turn to whatever can entertain them including alcohol drinking. Third, the existing poor work conditions for boarding personnel has meant that schools have had to engage officers who are not well-suited for the job and who cannot cope with its demands on a daily basis. This leads to the forth issue of the large students' numbers in boarding schools that has implications for an increased personnel to support the boarding master. The paper concludes that discipline problems in boarding schools would be reduced if the above issues are given due attention by the powers that be in the Ministry of Education.

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