

The Role of Civic Education in Civic Participation Among Students of Some Selected Tertiary Institutions in Zambia

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ABSTRACT

This study investigated the role of Civic Education in civic participation among students of selected tertiary institutions in Zambia. Adopting a qualitative case study approach within a constructivist paradigm, the research examined how Civic Education equips students with the skills, values, and attitudes necessary for active engagement in civic life. The study relied on Sherry Arnstein's ladder of citizen participation model and the transformative learning theory. The sample size was 47, comprising 2 Deans of student affairs, 5 lecturers of Civic Education, 8 Student union representatives, and 32 students of Civic Education. Participants were selected using a combination of homogenous and heterogeneous purposive sampling techniques to ensure diverse yet relevant perspectives. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews, focus group discussions (FGDs), and document analysis. Data was analyzed using thematic analysis. The findings of the study revealed that Civic Education significantly contributes to student civic participation by cultivating critical thinking and analytical skills, instilling a sense of responsibility and patriotism, promoting community engagement, and enhancing involvement in governance issues. However, the study identified a notable gap between the theoretical objectives of Civic Education and its practical application, highlighting the need for curriculum amendments in certain institutions to bridge this divide. The study recommends that higher learning institutions actively promote civic participation by funding student-led civic activities and refining pedagogical approaches to incorporate more experiential and participatory learning strategies. Additionally, the Civic Education curriculum should include practical components, and students should be encouraged to assume leadership roles. Strengthening collaboration between students, politicians, and communities is also suggested to enhance students' civic participation skills. By addressing these areas, the study underscores the transformative potential of Civic Education in shaping informed, engaged, and responsible citizens.

Keywords: Civic Education, civic participation, higher learning institutions, community engagement, Zambia.

INTRODUCTION

Civic Education is formally taught at both secondary school and higher learning institutions in Zambia. Civic Education, in its broadest definition, refers to the transmission of knowledge and educational experiences designed to enable and empower citizens to engage in democratic processes (Chivunda and Mupeta, 2023; Muleya, 2017a, 2017b, 2019). Zizon, (2023) defines Civic Education as a collection of activities that influence the attitudes, commitments, abilities, and behaviors of individuals as current or potential members of a community. Furthermore, Civic Education encompasses all processes that influence individuals' views, commitments, competencies, and actions as current or potential members of communities (Crittenden and Levine, 2018). The objective of the subject is to assist individuals, particularly the youth, in acquiring information and skills necessary for being engaged, informed, and responsive citizens (Magasu, Muleya, and Mweemba, 2020). Additionally, Muleya (2015) contends that Civic Education, as an integral component of the National Curriculum, is essential for instilling social, political, economic, cultural, and technological principles that facilitate learners' integration into their communities and their contributions to development. Further, it is contended that concerns around how to tackle low civic participation among young people become directed at

the educational system and the potential role that civic education can play in addressing these democratic deficits can no longer be over-emphasized. (Pontes et al, 2019).Jaamaat et al (2022) found a variety of educational aspects that support the argument that civic education can reduce low civic participation not only among the students but generally across all those who would be exposed to its principles and practices (Donbavand & Hoskins, 2012; Jerome et al, 2024; Neundorf et al, 2016; Sloam et al, 2012, Weinberg, 2021).

According to Crittenden and Levine (2018), Civic Education is considered a lifelong attempt that covers a variety of organizations, including families, governments, religious organizations, and the media. It is regarded as a crucial method for educating individuals of all ages about their rights, duties, and responsibilities within society. Constitutional democracies are sustained when individuals acquire virtues and ethos derived from subjects like Civic Education. It equips the young people with basic knowledge and skills so that they become citizens who can be relied upon by the nation and the state (Makmur, 2023). Thus, Young people are expected to deliberate on contentious social and political matters and monitor governmental actions that bring into line with public interests. Additionally, some studies that were conducted especially in the UK and USA (Hooghe & Wilkenfield, 2007; Keating et al, 2011; Keating & Janmaat, 2016) showed that subjects like civic education or citizenship education enhance political understanding and engagement by way of linking it to increased and durable or long-lasting political and civic participation in adulthood. This view is further supported by Tonge et al (2012) who have contended that young people who receive civic education or Citizenship Education show a better understanding of local and national issues and are more likely to engage in civic activism. Weinsberg & Flinders (2018) notes that the result of better understanding of local and national issues could yield positive impact leading to long-lasting skills and values required to shape young people's habits and good identities into adulthood.

Civic participation in higher education institutions is essential. It encompasses a wide range of actions, including volunteering, participating in public policy discussions, engaging in electoral processes, and advocating for social change (Baumi Blevins et al., 2022; Agyeman & Malherbe, 2021).. Keeter et al (2002) observed that citizen civic participation is a diverse array of activities that are categorized into three non-exclusive categories: civic activities, political voice activities, and electoral activities. Furthermore, Cnaan & Park (2016) noted that civic participation constitutes a long and varied set of activities that individuals can do on their own or in groups that enhance the quality of life of others which include association participation, giving, volunteering, environment-friendly behaviors, political and social behaviors, and supporting-helping individuals. The focus of civic participation is on voluntary associations that foster the health and well-being of a community, including membership in communal organizations, religious organizations, clubs, or professional associations, as well as volunteering, charitable fundraising, and community problem-solving. In the majority of cases, citizens who are aware of and understand their civic rights have actively engaged in civic, political and electoral activities.

In higher education, students' civic participation includes many activities such as voting, volunteering, community service, political advocacy, and involvement in campus governance among others (Agyeman & Malherbe, 2021). The Republic of Zambia's higher education system comprises both public and private universities and colleges. Currently, Zambia has 10 public and 53 private higher education Institutions (ZAQA, 2024). The Higher Education Act of 2013 which established the Higher Education Authority was assented to by the Zambian Parliament on March 21, 2013. This Act established and defined its functions and powers. It also provided for quality assurance and quality promotion in higher education, the establishment, governance, and regulation of public higher education institutions, the registration and regulation of private higher education institutions, the repeal and replacement of the University Act, 1999, and matters connected with or incidental to the aforementioned. (National Assembly of Zambia, 2013)

The Act's statements clearly indicate that higher education in Zambia is highly valued and was established to cultivate learners who were equipped with pertinent knowledge, skills, and values that would facilitate civic participation and address the needs and issues of society in order to facilitate national development. For this reason, higher education institutions are encouraged to create programs that would equip students with an understanding of national values and characteristics. Civic Education is one of the courses that is offered in higher learning institutions to fulfil this purpose. It is in light of the foregoing that, the study sought to explore the contribution of civic Education on student civic participation in selected higher learning institutions in Zambia.

STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

Civic and political participation are indicative of a nation's democratic status (Willeck & Mendelberg, 2022). They are the basis of a society's collective social well-being (Fenn et al, 2021) and enhance people's sense of social belonging and identity within their society (Encina et al, 2021). The World Bank (2007) and the National Research Council and Institute of Medicine's Committee on Population, USA (Lloyd, 2005) assert that the civic participation of youth is vital for the well-being of communities, economies, governments, and society. To this end, promoting civic participation among young students in higher education institutions (HEIs) has become contemporary. This is due to the seemingly low involvement of students in civic activities and the weakening structures of HEIs to serve as arenas for developing students' interest in civic activities. As Lee et al (2021) noted, institutions of learning remain logical places for promoting students' civic participation. Globally, Target 7 of the United Nations Sustainable Development Goal (SDG) 4 stipulates that by 2030, all learners must attain the knowledge and skills necessary for fostering sustainable development through global citizenship, human rights, gender equality, and an appreciation of cultural diversity (UNESCO 2019a). Following the request, the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) has developed the Global Citizenship Education (GCED) strategy to tackle issues of inequality, poverty, and human rights violations that threaten global peace and sustainability. Furthermore, UNESCO (2019b) identifies GCED as a mechanism to educate and empower learners of all ages to advocate for inclusive, peaceful, tolerant, and sustainable communities. Additionally, the UNDP (2012) in Kaumba (2015), stated that national and local government policies and legal frameworks provide for broad-based participation in national processes although limited public participation has been observed. Research indicates that numerous Western nations along with low-income countries are witnessing a decline in civic and political engagement (Cameron, 2021). If this represents the worldwide situation, then modern societies ought to be concerned about their future. The decrease in civic involvement and political engagement may threaten the political stability of a community and its democracy. Therefore, the development and dissemination of knowledge and skills through Civic Education can only be fulfilled when students engage actively and address societal demands.

The extent to which today's youth, especially students in higher education institutions in Zambia are civically and politically engaged and prepared to assume leadership roles in their country is a matter of concern. Consequently, understanding their degree of involvement and the factors affecting their participation may help in their transition into future leadership responsibilities and governance of their country. Against this background, this study, explores the role of Civic Education in civic participation among students of some selected tertiary institutions in Zambia.

METHODOLOGY

The study adopted a qualitative approach and the research paradigm was constructivism. The objective of this study was; to explore how civic education contributes to civic participation among students of some selected tertiary institutions in Zambia. The study was conducted in three selected tertiary institutions in Zambia namely; University U, K, and M. The target population were third and fourth-year students, Student union leaders, educators of civic education and Deans of student affairs in the selected tertiary institutions in Zambia namely; University U, K, and M. Homogenous and heterogeneous purposive sampling techniques were used to sample participants. Semi-structured interviews were used to generate data from the five educators and 2 Deans of student affairs, 8 union leaders from the three selected tertiary institutions while 32 students of civic education were subjected to Focus Group Discussions (FGDs). University U had 15 participants, University K, 19 and University M had 13 participants, giving a total of 47 participants. Triangulation of data sources was done through focus group discussions, interviews, and document analysis, this was done to avoid potential biases. Theme analysis was used to analyze the data.

PRESENTATION OF FINDINGS

The research findings are presented in themes which emerged when a question was asked to establish how Civic Education contributed to student civic participation in higher learning institutions.

Enhances transmission of skills of analysis and critical thinking.

L1 U University submitted the following:

Students develop skills of analysis, critical thinking and participation such that even when it comes to change of regime, students are able to analyze which leaders are passionate, accountable and patriotic before voting for them.

Similarly, **L2 (M)** added that the Civic Education Curriculum was designed in such a way that students were empowered with tools of analysis. This is what was said:

The Civic Education Curriculum is designed in such way that students are imparted with tools of analysis which help them to look at life situations either at school or home with that positive perspective rather than a fixed mind, their minds are opened, changed and are receptive to others.

Additionally, **L3 (M)** added that the Civic Education content covered from first year to fourth year emphasize three key elements to enable students get involved in civic affairs. This is what was said:

Civic Education contributes to student civic participation in the sense that the entire content covered from first year to fourth year emphasizes three key elements which are civic skills, civic knowledge and civic disposition and with these elements' students are able to participate in civic affairs in their communities by informing, questioning and explaining to others on what needs to be done.

When the students in **FGDs** were asked to explain how Civic Education contributed to student Civic participation in higher learning institutions, the students indicated that Civic Education had enabled them to know their rights and so they were able to analyze and voice out their concerns whenever they had issues with management or when arbitrary decisions were made. Further students indicated that learning Civic Education had made them become fearless when it came to expressing their views on issues affecting them.

The views of these students in the FGDs reflected what one of the students from one of the universities interviewed electronically observed. This is what she said:

Through the knowledge I acquired in Civic Education, I have learnt how to analyze certain decisions made by the university administration and together with other students have spoken out if our rights are violated.

Enhances a sense of responsibility and patriotism

On developing a sense of responsibility and patriotism some of the participants acknowledged the fact that Civic Education enabled the students of Civic Education to develop a sense of responsibility and patriotism which made them to get involved in various activities within and outside the institution.

According to **L 4 (K)**, the teaching of Civic Education in Higher learning Institutions has enabled students develop a sense of responsibility and patriotism to take part in various activities. **L4** pointed out the following:

There is a sense of responsibility on the part of the learners, we see a lot of youths refusing to be used as tools of electoral violence by politicians and talking about voting, the 2021 elections were a reflection of what Civic Education can do. We saw a number of youths going to vote because they thought that the affairs of the nation were not run the way they were supposed to be, all because of awareness.

One student from the selected institutions echoed the same sentiments and had this to say:

Because of the knowledge we acquire in Civic Education we are no longer used by politicians during campaigns to cause violence. In the past, we used to follow politicians blindly for small rewards but now we know what is best for our country.

One student union leader had this to say:

With the knowledge that I acquired from Civic Education and as a union leader, I have been able to mobilise others for peaceful resolution of conflict through dialogue when we have an issue with management instead of resorting to violence. We also take the responsibility of explaining policy issues to our fellow students.

Students of Civic Education in the **FGD** from the selected universities mentioned that Civic Education enabled them to become responsible citizens. During the COVID - 19 era, they were able to sensitize and encouraged others to adhere to the health guidelines in addition, they had participated in keeping their environment clean by volunteering to do some manual work especially through associations and clubs where they were members. Outside the institution students of Civic Education had participated in sensitization programs and helped the less privileged in society through making donations. In order to enhance the sense of responsibility among students of Civic Education, there was need for university management to deliberately come up with programs such as station up keep and production unit as it was in the past in learning institutions.

It fosters participation in governance issues

With regards to Civic Education helping students know the importance of taking part in governance issues, it was clear that Civic Education helped students of Civic Education to take part in governance issues. Civic Education enabled students to visit institutions of governance to learn on how the institutions operated, explained issues affecting society and were able to stand for political office.

L1 (U) pointed out that Civic Education enabled students of Civic Education to participate in governance through visiting parliament and had this to say:

As a lecturer of Civic Education, I led a delegation of students to go to parliament to observe whether the Members of Parliament were debating issues critically thus exposing students to issues affecting them and society.

Additionally, **L 2 (U)** University narrated the following:

Civic Education is a subject that make our students critical thinkers and participators, we see that even when they graduate from our institution that they are not dormant but are very active in that they speak out on radio or write articles in newspapers where they pin point some problems affecting society and in certain cases offer solutions thus participating in the governance process of their country.

A student union leader at **U** university revealed the following:

The guild student governance body requires that every student pay an affiliation fee to help facilitate the work of the union. Using the knowledge, I acquired in Civic Education on governance and taxation, am able to relate that for any governing body to operate, it should have revenue and this has made me see the importance of affiliating to this body so that the affairs of the guild are done smoothly thus participating in the student governance.

Additionally, a student from one of the selected institutions of learning echoed that it was through the knowledge acquired from Civic Education that most students of Civic Education were able to participate in governance issues because Civic Education made them fearless. She had this to say:

Civic Education makes me aware of issues affecting me as a citizen and develops interest in me to follow up governance issues and I have become fearless when it comes to commenting on governance issues because I have the knowledge.

DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

The study found out that, Civic Education helped learners to develop skills of analysis and critical thinking. This was because the Civic Education Curriculum was designed in such a way that learners were imparted with the tool of analysis which helped them to look at life situations positively rather than a fixed mind. Civic Education opens up the learner's mind to be receptive to others. The Civic Education content covered from the first to the

fourth year emphasizes three key elements: Civic Skills, Civic knowledge, and dispositions. This is supported by Makmur (2023). who noted that Civic Education is about preparing learners for effective citizenship in a democratic society by transmitting relevant skills, values and dispositions. These key elements enable the learners to participate in the civic affairs of their communities in that they can question and explain to others on what needs to be done.

Within the university, students used the skills of analysis and critical thinking to engage the university management when they were faced with issues affecting their welfare. The students analyzed issues and spoke out their concerns without fear or favor. Furthermore, Civic Education made a big contribution to student civic participation in Higher learning institutions in that students developed skills of analysis, critical thinking and participation such that during elections they were able to use their skills to vote for leaders who they thought were passionate, accountable and patriotic. These findings were consistent with Mainde and Chola (2020) study which noted that Civic Education sharpens learners' critical thinking skills, which are important in analyzing social and other issues.

The knowledge acquired in Civic Education did not only end at the institutional level, it goes beyond to their communities. Using the knowledge acquired, students could analyze the candidates for elections, based on the information learned on governance and leadership. Before voting for their leaders, students looked for certain qualities in their leaders such as patriotism, accountability, honesty, transparency and handwork among others. The large voter turnout of youths during the 2021 general election in Zambia may be attributed to the knowledge students acquired at secondary school and university level on the importance of voting for credible leaders.

Based on the findings of this study, the researcher was of the view that; Civic Education develops in the learners skills of analysis and critical thinking as was evidenced in the way students spoke out about problems affecting them and did not take the information from management literally but were able to speak out on issues affecting them. Furthermore, students did not just join the student union or vote for their leaders without applying their skills of analysis and critical thinking. Using this knowledge from Civic Education, students also made informed decisions about joining a union or not based on their analysis. That is why student union membership in the selected universities is not compulsory but rather students decide to join the union or not based on their analysis.

The findings of the study suggested that Civic Education developed in learners a sense of responsibility and patriotism which enabled them to participate in various activities within and outside the institutions. It was revealed that as a result of the knowledge that students acquired in Civic Education, students in higher learning institutions were no longer used as tools of electoral violence by politicians during campaigns to cause violence. In the past students in higher learning institutions used to follow politicians blindly for small rewards which was no longer the same as students in higher learning institutions had through the knowledge acquired in Civic Education learnt how to be patriotic and acted responsibly.

These findings were in line with Kasenge and Muleya (2020) study which established that Civic Education fosters deep democracy ...and recognition of interdependency in working for common good. However, this view is contrary to Mukunto (2019) study which suggested that, youths in Zambia were being used as tools of electoral violence. The above findings suggest that Civic Education may develop a sense of responsibility and patriotism in learners if students were enlightened although the change may be gradual.

Furthermore, the findings of the study were that Civic Education enabled student Union leaders to take responsibility of mobilizing other students for peaceful resolution of conflict through dialogue and explaining policy issues to them. Taking up student union leadership in higher learning institutions was an indication that students understood the importance of governance both at the local level and national level. This role was further enhanced when students were able to take up the responsibility of mobilizing others for the peaceful resolution of disputes.

The findings of the study further suggested that, with the knowledge acquired in Civic Education, students had become more responsible citizens by helping the Ministry of Health in sensitizing fellow students and members of the community in implementing the COVID - 19 guidelines, keeping the environment clean and volunteering to do some manual work through the associations and clubs they were affiliated to within the institutions of

learning. Not only that, students had taken up the responsibility of donating various items to the less privileged in the community. These findings were in line with the study by Walsh (2013) which discovered that education in America was a way in which young people were taught to be good citizens and instilled in them a sense of morality and responsibility. A similar view was held by Ajibola (2014) who argued that, Civic Education in Nigerian Curriculum addressed issues that were important to developing young people into responsible citizens as the curriculum enabled the young people to absorb the values, norms, knowledge, actions, and activities for sustainable development. On the contrary, Agyeman and Malberbe (2021) study in Ghana revealed that, the education system in Ghana had not been able to influence student's sense of civic responsibility, thereby resulting in apathy towards civic duties.

The findings of the study were consistent with the theoretical model on citizen participation specifically the fourth rung which is Consultation. Arnstein (1969) stated that, the essential characteristic of the consultation level is involving citizen's opinions. Students of Civic Education in higher learning institutions gave their opinions on certain issues affecting them whether initiated by management, by themselves or their union leaders and were able to plan various activities to be undertaken within and outside the institution with the help of their lecturers.

It is therefore imperative that in order to enhance student's levels of responsibility and patriotism, institutions of learning should deliberately come up with programs of student involvement and allocate resources. This money could be used for cleaning their surroundings, being involved in production unit instead of depending on auxiliary workers to do the work for them, in that way Civic Education would be seen to have served its purpose.

The study discovered that, Civic Education enabled citizens to learn the importance of taking part in governance issues. This was done through visiting institutions of governance like parliament and the courts, explaining issues affecting society on radio or television and standing for political office. Civic Education is a subject that developed students who were critical thinkers and participators. Students who graduated from the selected higher learning institutions were not dormant but were very active in that they spoke out on various issues affecting them and society on radio or wrote articles in newspapers where they pin pointed some problems affecting society and in certain cases offered solutions thus participating in the governance process of their country.

Furthermore, student's participation in governance issues was seen in the visits made to parliament in order to observe how the Members of Parliament were debating issues affecting them and society. Visiting the courts of law enabled students understand the importance of courts in promoting justice and the criminal justice procedure in general.

Within the institutions, students participated in governance by joining the student union, associations and clubs. In addition, students participated by standing for leadership positions within and outside the institutions. As Mbambo (2013) wrote, the inclusion and participation of students within institutional governance is a pre-requisite for the democratization of Higher Education Institutions. Suffice it to state that some of the students who graduated from the selected higher learning institutions held high and influential positions in society at local government and national levels. The students of Civic Education had contributed to the governance of this country by adding a voice to what was happening in their communities and the country at large thus validating the important role played by Civic Education in promoting participation in governance issues.

In line with the theoretical model on citizen participation level five, students in higher learning institutions and in terms of their participation in governance issues fell under placation which according to Arnstein was two ways. Student participation based on level five could be seen as mere tokenism or more of tokenism. Based on the research findings and in line with the theoretical model, student participation in governance in higher learning institutions could be termed as more than tokenism in some institutions where decisions or suggestions coming from students were considered by lecturers, management and other stakeholders. For example, participants from one of selected higher learning institutions indicated that, student union leaders had lobbied for a reduction in the percentage of fees for students to register for courses from 50% to 30% and it was accepted by management of that institution. In another institution, union leaders challenged management on the ineffectiveness of the online classes and their plight to improve in this area was honored by management. This suggested more than tokenism participation or representation in those higher learning institutions. Suffice to state that, student

participation in various activities varied according to institutions.

From the discussion above, it is clear that Civic Education enabled the learners to appreciate the importance of taking part in governance issues at institution, community and national levels. Therefore, Civic Education should be taught in such a way that learners were prepared to engage in the governance of their country.

The knowledge that students acquired in Civic Education did not only end in the classroom but was applied in society. Civic Education opened up the minds of students and they became more receptive to the needs of others and so the students joined clubs and associations where they identified communities that needed help and were able to reach out to them in various ways. Civic Education encouraged students to link up and participate in the affairs of their communities.

Arnot, Casey- Hagford and Jeboah(2018) study in Ghana revealed that there were practical gaps in integrating the youth into national projects , especially those that addressed issues of social equality, cultural recognition, critical thinking and inclusion .In another study conducted by Billings et al (2014), it was noted that colleges and universities could increase students' knowledge of their communities by combining community focused courses into their curriculum, holding lectures , conferences on relevant community topics, and by encouraging students to become involved in co- curricular experiences on and outside campus.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, this study emphasizes the vital role of Civic Education in enhancing student civic participation within higher learning institutions. By fostering critical thinking, analytical skills, and a sense of responsibility, students are better equipped to engage in societal and governance matters. The curriculum's focus on civic skills, knowledge, and dispositions empowers students to participate in civic life, from addressing institutional issues to engaging in national governance. The findings reveal that Civic Education cultivates patriotism and responsibility, evidenced by increased involvement in non-violent electoral processes, community service, and leadership roles. It shifts students from passive to active citizens, enabling them to confidently express concerns and contribute to societal change. This was evident in their interactions with governance institutions like parliament, student unions, and community service initiatives. Furthermore, the study highlights the need for higher education institutions to integrate programs that further enhance students' civic responsibility and patriotism. As shown in the findings, students equipped with Civic Education not only become active citizens but also significantly contribute to shaping their communities' political and social landscape. Therefore, Civic Education should remain a cornerstone of higher education curricula, fostering engaged, responsible citizens capable of addressing modern governance challenges.

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