

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF SCIENCE ARTS AND COMMERCE

School Bell: Experiences and Implications to Tanzanian Secondary Schools

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Abstract

This is a qualitative study that investigated the use of bells in Tanzanian primary and secondary schools. Its objective was to determine the experiences of schools, teachers and students in relation to the use of bell(s). The main assumption of the study is that school bell in one of the socialization agents in Tanzania. It mainly focused on the types, number and location of bells in each school, the functions of the bells, characteristics and experiences of timekeepers, and the influence of bells on students and teachers in relations to school life. The subjects of the study were composed of mostly teachers, students and school timekeepers in Morogoro and Kilimanjaro Regions. The study also used subject the researcher had encountered in different occasions. The main data collecting instruments were interviews and observations. The findings included that all schools had “bells” of different types located in areas to be heard by all; timekeepers were outstanding students, and there are three main functions of the school bell. The school bell is of prime importance in smooth function of school. Use of school bell is part of the hidden curriculum in Tanzania. It recommended that further studies should be carried out to establish if experiences with school bell has any psychological effects on students, teachers and timekeepers.

Key concepts: school, school bell, time keeper.

Introduction

School bell is one of the common features in Tanzanian school system. It is found in institutions related to pre-school education, primary school education and secondary school education. Life in school setting is unimaginable in absence of school bell. The effects of lack of school bell include lack of respect for time, not finishing syllabus on time, excuse for lateness and declining in teaching quality [1]. For Tanzania one can conclude that currently there is no substitute for the school bell. Thus, school bell is of paramount importance in realization of school objectives in Tanzania.

Having pointed that out it is worth noting that the study was unable to find state regulations on the characteristics of a formal school bell(s) and the modality of its use. Nor was it established that a bell is a compulsory instrument in all schools. Also it was observed that rarely do school inspectors assess the status of school bells in their areas. It was only in one school that an inspector had directed that the bell be moved to another location for a matter of convenience. The implication is that although a bell is critical component in Tanzanian schools not much has been done to determine its influence in the school community.

Statement of the problem

A school bell is significant in influencing the behaviours of both students and teachers in Tanzanian school system. This study focused on determining the experiences of schools, teachers and students in relation to the use of bell(s). This study will bring awareness of the impact of school bell on life while in school and in life after school.

The objectives of the study included to determine the types, number and location of bells in each school, the functions of the bells, characteristics and experiences of timekeepers, and the influence of bells on students and teachers in relations to school life.

Conceptual Framework

The main assumption in this study is that school bell is a crucial component in school settings. It is mainly used to create efficiency and the smooth running of school i.e. in absence of the bell it is close to impossible to have adequate time management in schools in Tanzania.

The second assumption is that schools being agents of socialization, they use bells to develop and mould individuals' behaviours. Socialization is a process which moulds an individual into a social person [2]. This is a lifelong process in which a person acquires language, culture, values, norms, attitudes and behaviour that form his/her personality i.e. making him/her a social being. The school bell is one method/tool a school as part of the society uses to control the person within a social context. Social control is the power of organisations, institutions and laws of society to influence and regulate behaviour, also the impact of religion, education and media and other social forces on an individual/group behavior [3]. Thus, the researcher proposes that school bell is an aspect in a school environment that has impact on the student while in school and influence on his/her personality after living school (future).

Operational Definition of Key concepts

School in this study refers to primary and secondary schools in Tanzania.

School bell refers to any official loud instrument used to communicate with all members in the school environment.

Time keeper is the person(s) officially responsible for ringing the school bell as required by the school regulations.

Limitations

This study is only limited to situation in schools that the researcher had access to physically and the subjects that he had informal encounter with. Most of the schools visited were public schools and private schools that accept The Open University of Tanzania students for teaching practice. None of the schools in the study were located in affluent areas. Thus the results of the study although may portray the situation in many schools the results and the conclusions cannot be generalized to all schools in Tanzania.

Methodology

This was an informal study since it did not adhere strictly to principle of a formal scientific investigation. The study has some aspects of a quantitative approach but it is mainly based on qualitative approach. In qualitative approach the researcher was interested in looking in-depth at subjects rather examining numbers of subjects. It used some schools in the surrounding of the researcher; those that he visited for official reasons (Teaching Practice supervision) in Kilimanjaro and Morogoro Regions and in other social encounters with teachers and students from schools in other regions. The study gathered information from more than 30 schools, most being secondary schools. The subjects of the study included primary and secondary school teachers, heads of schools, students, time keepers and class monitors. There was no random sampling as the study only approached people with relevant information in regard to use of school bell. This implies anybody within the school system in Tanzania.

The study employed a number of means to get the required information. Observation was used to determine the type of bell(s) in respective schools, and the location of the bell(s) relative to school's physical layout. Structured interview was used to determine the history of the bell in each school, the characteristics of the time keeper, and the functions of school bell in the schools. Unstructured interviews were used to gather subjects' personal experiences and opinions in regard to school bell. All the subjects' responses were recorded in form of notes. It is worth noting that none of the subjects was aware that their responses were part of a study.

Results

It Is Not a "True Bell" but It Is a "School Bell"

The study found that all schools had what is considered as a "bell". None of the schools surveyed had an electric bell, even in those schools with access to electricity from the national grid! An electric bell is a mechanic bell that operates by means of an electromagnetic to produce repetitive

buzzing sound [4]. Electric bell can be set to ring automatically at a specific time of the day. Lacking an electric bell in some schools in Tanzania leads to having “bells” that are operated manually and school time keepers.

Most of school bells (with exception of only one secondary school with a real hand bell) are not real bells but metal pieces or other objects meant for other purposes not related to school. Some of school bells were old tire rims of different sizes (size ranging from that of a small car to that of mid-sized truck), plough discs, steel tubes, and a piece of rail. One school used the steel post holding the Notice Board as a bell! It is worth noting that schools that use plough discs are areas that have tractors used in farms. It was also observed that the pieces of hitting the “bell” also varied in shape and length. However, all of these pieces were light in weight. One common factor in all these “school bells” was that they were composed of a metal that produces loud sounds. Almost none of the respective schools could give the history of their bell! The explanation was always “we found it” when we arrived in this school. Asked if they have thought of buying a real bell or having an electric bell; all responded that they have not done so.

The above imply that the state has no role in obtaining bells for its schools but rather it is a matter for the respective schools. However, all schools are expected to have anything that functions as a school bell.

Number of Bells in a School and Its implications

Most schools, including all day schools, had only one bell used for all occasions. In day schools students are under the control of the bell only when the first bell ushers in a new school day and to disperse to go home. Thus, bell has influence only partially in the student’s daily life.

Two boarding secondary schools had two bells. One bell was for activities relating to life in the dormitories and the other one for classroom activities. One secondary boarding school had three bells. The two relatively big bells were used as in the two above mentioned schools. The small hand-bell (the only actual bell in schools in the study) was for only for classroom activities i.e. lesson periods.

Thus, the number of bells in respective schools reflected the students’ school life. Day schools do not need bells for before or after school activities. The boarding schools with more than one bell implied that they differentiate classroom life and dormitory life. The implication is that students in boarding schools are under the control of the school bell until the end of the term. The dormitory life though to some degree has more freedom; it is not as free as in normal household. Through the bell the students are controlled when to wake up, have physical exercise, eat, and sleep. Even during the weekend town leave student have to report back before the roll call bell. Unlike in household environment one is forced to eat when s/he is not hungry just because the bell has rung or being hungry but not allowed to eat even when the food is ready just because the bell has not rung! Also, one is forced to keep quite pretending to be asleep just because the bedtime bell has rung. Speaking with your colleagues who are also awake in the same room is also prohibited. A student is free to make noise after the morning bell. In co-

education boarding secondary schools the bell determines when students of different sexes can be together and when each sex should be in their separate allocated areas. A student being found in an area that is different from that of his/her sex can lead to serious problems. Also, a bell can ring anytime of the day (especially in the weekends) and/or during the night to check those who are present in school and those who are absent. The consequences of not being in the school area at this time can lead to severe punishment including being suspended or expelled from school. In one of the secondary school one student was expelled from school for being in the dormitory area when the bell for being in the class had already rang.

Thus, in boarding schools a bell has great control and influence on the student's life while in school and the way a student responds can have effect on his future.

Location of the bell

As expected all school bells were located outside in an open area. The location of a bell was very much related to the physical layout of school buildings and the intended functions of the bell. Boarding schools with two bells had one bell in placed in the administration area and the other one in the dormitories' area. For day schools the bells were centrally located around the classroom. Few schools had specific structures for the bells. Most schools in the study hang their bell on trees. In one school the bell was on the ground and had to be picked to be rung! Proximity of the bell to the timekeeper varied in the respective school. For some timekeepers the bell was just outside their classrooms. For some the bell was relatively far and the timekeeper has to spend some time and face weather elements to ring the bell. Many schools in Tanzania lack some basic items quantitatively and qualitatively but none lacked a bell. Thus, the bell is a common physical feature in all schools i.e. it is an indispensable tool for activities (behaviours) in school.

The Timekeeper

A timekeeper is a person or an instrument that records or checks time [5]. Several occupations have timekeepers. All schools in the study had timekeepers due to absence of electric bells. However, in all schools the timekeepers were students and none had a teacher as timekeeper or an official timekeeper. Even teachers on duty did not take this responsibility. Asked the rationale of teachers not serving as timekeepers, the responses expressed were not clear, just saying that is how things have being since then. The only reason the researcher interpreted this state of affair was solely that timekeeping is very demanding and none was prepared to undertake this responsibility.

All schools had senior timekeeper and deputy timekeeper. One timekeeper was a male while the other one was a female in all schools i.e. all schools in the study practiced sex equality in this one issue. Having two timekeepers reflects the significance of the timekeeper in school system. The school cannot function efficiently in absence of a timekeeper for any reason. Thus, the

second timekeeper is there to take over timekeeping responsibilities when/if the senior timekeeper cannot do so.

In discussions with several teachers in the respective schools and some in other schools it was observed all schools appointed timekeepers based on several significant characteristics. For a student to be appointed (no ground for democracy here!) as a timekeeper his/her previous school record must show that s/he has an excellent prior school attendance, always punctual (also known as good timekeeping), trustworthy, highly responsible and can obviously accurately read a watch. Although not required, the teachers indicated that their school's timekeepers were having a good performance in their lessons. Also the researcher, not based on objectivity, noticed that the timekeepers he had an opportunity to have a discussions with were dressed smartly and looked/behaved as people with integrity. In short, timekeepers are supposed to be outstanding students in their respective schools.

A timekeeper must have a functioning watch to function accordingly. In old days you could tell a class had a timekeeper by the presence of a big clock hanging on the wall or placed on a table. The clocks were property of the schools. In this study none of the schools had a big clock in any of their classroom but some (7 secondary schools) had clocks in the staffroom for teachers. No one provided a rational answer as to why these clocks were not hanged in timekeepers' classroom. All timekeepers had digital wrist watches. Some were students' personal property and some belonged to respective schools. This situation, coupled with the types of bells used in these schools, one can accurately conclude very little money (if any at all) is invested on timekeeping. The school timekeeper is directly accountable to the school teacher on duty for that week. On discussions with teachers the study found that all schools were very satisfied with the performance of their respective timekeepers. Also, other students have high respect for the timekeepers.

Most of the timekeepers took the responsibility with honour. However, a few (about three) complained that they do not like this responsibility and clearly indicated so to teachers on being appointed timekeepers. They only accepted the responsibilities after pressure from school administration. They perform timekeepers' responsibilities with some grudges. Among the complains is having to be in school earlier than most other students; being conscious of the time all the time while in school; missing last part of the period to go ring the bell and also facing weather elements on the way to and from the place the ring is placed. In some urban areas timekeepers had an extra burden of making sure the bell was in safe place during the night since leaving it outside can lead to it being stolen by people scavenging for scrap materials to make money. Psychological issue they face is being conditioned to always be conscious of time and checking time on their watches numerous times in a school day. Two indicated this aspect was also even experienced after school hours and in other social encounters.

Without being obvious to many, the study observed that school timekeepers have immense powers. Just by ringing a bell they initiate or suspend activities of all individuals in a respective schools (learn, teach, eat, play etc); create movements for individuals to be in specific

areas/location in the schools (classroom, office, dining hall, playground etc); curtail or allow individuals' freedom (during recess one can play joyfully and go to the toilet without first getting permission from anybody, keep and maintain silence during lessons, sit or stand); determine who and when to punishment (come before the bell no problem, come late or be in the "wrong" place expect to be punished).

It is also worth noting that the timekeeper above all has the power of assigning responsibilities/authority to specific individuals within the school system. When the time keeper rings the bell to go to class or change to another period the respective teacher is responsible for classroom management. However, if it happens the teacher is not in the classroom the monitor is responsible to control the class (noisemakers are recorded and passed to the teacher). Monitor's power lasts between the ringing of the bell to start the period until upon the teacher entering the class or the timekeeper rings the bell to end the period.

One can conclude that timekeepers in these respective schools are responsible and behave like socially mature adults. Their task, through the use of a bell, is the most significant component in running and managing school efficiently and effectively.

Functions of the school bell

The study found that the first function of the bell is indicating the start and end of the school day. It was observed that most school students were expected to be in school ground just before 7:00 am. The time between arriving in school and ringing of the bell is spent on cleanness and other activities other than learning/teaching. The bell for the beginning of the first period varied among the respective schools in the study. To some schools the first period begin at 7:30 am; others at 7:40 am, 7:45 am, 7:50 am or 8:00 am. The study did not determine the rational for the bases of these variations. Even schools in the same area and/or with relatively similar conditions exhibited this variation. Most teachers indicated the set starting time in their respective schools was perhaps based on historical reasons. The most important fact is that The Ministry of Education, Technology and Vocational Training does not have a specific official time for starting a school day. The starting bell implies that the school is officially operating as an education institution i.e. an atmosphere and environment that facilitates teaching/learning processes. Also the hour for the end of school bell varied among the respective schools. The end of school day bell does not imply for students to disperse right away but rather to assemble to be permitted for departure from the school grounds.

The second function of the school bell is to indicate and sequence events in schools' day routine. For all the schools in the study the main events during the week days (Monday to Friday) indicated by the bell are assembly, morning periods, then a short break followed some periods, followed by break for lunch and then afternoon periods. After afternoon lesson there is a bell for extra-curricular activities. In all secondary schools surveyed a single period's duration is 40 minutes while for double period it is 80 minutes. For primary schools duration for a period is 30 minutes for Standards One and Two. For the Standards Three and above the duration is 40

minutes. There are double periods in primary schools. The duration for the short break varied from 20 minutes to 30 minutes; and for lunch break it was between 60 minutes and 90 minutes. It is worth noting that schools that do not offer lunch to students the breaks are relatively shorter, and disperse early to go home. One can conclude that in Tanzanian school system there is a uniform duration of class periods but there are variations in timing and duration of breaks and length of school days.

The school bell is also used during an emergency or eventualities. This bell is rung by the teacher on duty or on his/her directives or by school administrator. The students know how and where to assemble for the appropriate instructions. Also for outside activities that cause suspension of lessons and during school end of term/year leave for students who attend school for cleanness purposes the bell is not used. The implication is that lack of use of bell within the school environment there are incidents that do not require strict time management.

Bell and Classroom Teaching and Learning

The main aim of establishing schools is to have a controlled environment that facilitates learning that leads to realization of state objectives. The main principles actors in the school system are teachers and students. It is complex environment composed of grades of different levels, and some schools each grade has a number of streams; also there are many teachers that are each required to teach a number of subjects to different grade levels and streams. The only tool appropriate to control and coordinate teaching/learning classroom activities in a school is the bell. The ringing of the school bell commands the beginning of period that creates the movement of teachers to specific classrooms to teach a specific subject/lesson; tells each student to be in specific room (laboratory) for a specific subject/lesson. At the end of period bell indicates that that period is over and initiates the process of the beginning of another period or recess.

Between the two bells (duration of period) the teacher is required to teach by presenting the subject content and the student is expected learn that content. Each teachers is required to enter the classroom with a lesson plan (instruction plan) showing the objectives of lesson, content and methods/strategies of delivering it. This aspect implies that the beginning of the teaching process occurs prior to the ringing of the bell; the ring only indicates the start of the teaching process (implement the lesson plan). However teaching is more than just presentation of subject content. Between period bells the teacher is expected to motivate a diverse group of learners and manage the class including addressing issues of misbehaving students [6].

The classroom atmosphere between the period bells assumes that students in a class are too a large a homogeneous group. However, data and research has proven that in one class there are students' differences in terms their physical, mental, emotional, gender, learning styles and social status [7]. For effective teaching the teacher must be competent in accommodating these student variations.

Break time/recess

After a number of periods all schools had break/recess. The start and end of recess is indicated by relatively (compared to only two hits between periods) long continuous bell rings. Recess refers to the break in a school activity in a school day for students to rest/play outside the classroom [8]. In the context of this study it is the period to rest after classroom activities i.e. after learning/teaching processes by students and teachers respectively. All schools in the study had two breaks, short one in the morning session (sometimes referred as tea-break) and a long one between morning sessions and afternoon sessions (sometimes referred as lunch-break). The benefits of school recess include break from the rigors of concentrated academic challenges in the classroom, being component of students' cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development [9]. That all schools in the study have recess after classroom activity is an acknowledgment of its significance on the students' development and future.

The students' major activity during these breaks was to go to the toilet. This situation is caused by students not being allowed to go to the toilet during one session of periods. Very rarely do students seek permission to go to the toilet during the lesson. Students learn to control their bladders until recess. There was a rush to the toilet in schools that had few toilets facilities to cater for all students at one time.

Most of boarding schools in the study students have tea and some bites during the morning recess and get lunch during the midday break. The quantity and quality of tea/bites and lunch offered varies among schools. As expected, based on their high fees, high status schools compared to other boarding schools offered better food. It was worth noting that most of recess time was spent on the process of getting tea/lunch and very little on none left for engaging in relaxing activities as break is intended for.

In day schools short recess activities vary. One factor that was common associated with it was sense of joyfulness, being playful and lots of noise. Some students (not all) in some of the schools there was access to tea/bites and food for lunch. The main determining factor of either getting bites/lunch was the financial power of the students' parents. The implication is that recess to some degree allows portrayal of social-economic discrepancies within the members of the same school/community. This study did not investigate the experiences of the students who have access to food and those who lack this opportunity; and teachers' opinion on teaching in a class with both types of students.

Bell and the Hidden curriculum

A hidden curriculum includes lessons that are taught informally, and usually unintentionally, in a school system. Students learn by forming ideas their environment, gender, morals, what is expected of them, social class, stereotypes, cultural expectations, politics, and language [10]. Hidden curriculum has both positive and negative consequences to the individual and society [11]. The Hidden curriculum makes students to interpreting directions, knowing teacher/adult-pleasing behaviours, fitting in with other students and working effectively in groups [12].

The Tanzanian students learn from the experiences of the use of school bell. Prior to enrolling in Tanzanian school system, individuals have little or no encounters with the bell. Children's life at home is relatively free and non-informal. Also it is worth noting that for most Tanzanians after leaving primary and secondary school system their lives are not related to the use of bell. The church is only institution in Tanzania that regularly uses bell to summon its members for worship. From this study one can deduce things that children learn unintentionally from the use of school bell.

Conscious of time

The bell conditions students to be conscious of time. Prior to entering school the individual has not experienced much the concept of specific time. This experienced in the form of school day, period, term and academic year. In school the bell teaches them the passage of time and that there is time for specific activities and in a certain order. Also they learn about official time and off time. In official time they learn what is expected of them in terms of dressing and behaving. This aspect, after being developed in school by the use bell, is carried on to their career life in the future.

Time management

The school bell makes students to be aware on how to use time efficiently. In case of school period they know they have to concentrate and grasp the subject content in a space of fixed time i.e. in 40 minutes or 80 minutes, term and academic. Also they have to make time after school hours for completing and preparing for classroom learning among other things in their lives. This aspect is more essential for students in boarding schools. Sometimes failing to complete a task before the end bell can lead to punishment. In Tanzanian schools punishment is common to students who come late to school or do not finish their task on time.

Working individually, with others, and in groups

The bells trains students when/how to operate individually although is surrounded by others, how to work and interact (socialize) with varied people (other students of different levels/characters; and teachers with various personalities). Also they learn how/when to work in groups to accomplish a task in a specific period of time.

Preparing students for formal and non-formal life in future

The school bell condition students to:

- To accommodate social control forces in their individual lives and in groups.
- Be aware about week days and weekend in term of employment; official time and non-official time.
- Be conscious of concentrating and completing work in a specific period of time.
- Know the dress code in accordance with time and occasion.
- Be able to work individually and/or in different groups
- Be able to live with people of different social-economic status and gender

Conclusion

- School bell is a common feature in all schools of the study. All schools use different types of mechanical bells that necessitate the need having timekeepers.
- The main functions of the school bell include indicating the start and end of school day, sequence of school events/activities and used during emergency.
- All timekeepers are outstanding students with specific characteristics. Their role of timekeeping has some psychological influence on some of the timekeepers.
- School bell is part of the hidden curriculum that has influence on the individual's future functions in the society.

Recommendations

- Further studies should investigate the psychological effects of the school bell on students and teachers.

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