

CONTEXTUALIZING STUDENTS' UNREST IN PUBLIC SCHOOLS:

**A CRITIQUE OF THE STATE OF AFFAIRS IN
LEARNING INSTITUTIONS IN AFRICA**

CONFERENCE PAPER

By

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1. INTRODUCTION

Education remains one of the most significant pillars for social transformation, economic growth, nation-building and sustainable development in Africa. Schools are expected to provide safe spaces for intellectual development, character formation, leadership nurturing and social integration. However, across the African continent, learning institutions are increasingly experiencing episodes of unrest, strikes, violence, destruction of property, indiscipline, arson attacks and confrontations between students and school administrations.

In recent years, countries such as Kenya, Uganda, South Africa, Nigeria, Zimbabwe and Ghana have witnessed growing incidents of student unrest in public learning institutions. These incidents often result in loss of lives, destruction of educational infrastructure, disruption of academic calendars, emotional trauma and enormous economic losses.

While student unrest is often interpreted as a manifestation of indiscipline among learners, a deeper analysis reveals that it is largely a symptom of wider systemic, social, economic, moral, institutional and governance challenges. Students are not isolated from society; they are products of families, communities, governments, schools and social systems. Consequently, unrest should be viewed not merely as a student problem but as a reflection of broader societal dysfunctions.

This paper seeks to critically examine the state of affairs contributing to unrest in learning institutions across Africa and proposes practical and faith-based interventions aimed at restoring discipline, dignity, stability and hope within educational environments.

2. JUSTIFICATION

The growing frequency and intensity of student unrest necessitate urgent reflection and action because:

1. Student unrest threatens the quality and continuity of education.
2. It causes destruction of public resources and infrastructure.
3. It undermines national development goals.
4. It negatively affects students' mental health and future prospects.

5. It weakens confidence in educational institutions.
6. It exposes underlying social and moral challenges within society.
7. It demands Multi-Sectoral interventions involving government, schools, families, religious institutions, and communities.
8. It presents an opportunity to rethink educational policies and governance structures.
9. It highlights the need for values-based education.
10. It calls for restoration of trust among stakeholders in the education sector.

3. MAIN AREAS OF CONCERN

A. PARENTS

i. Hands-Off Parenting: Many parents have delegated their parenting responsibilities entirely to schools, domestic workers, technology and peer groups. Character formation has increasingly been outsourced.

ii. Economic Pressures: Rising costs of living force many parents to spend extended periods away from home in pursuit of livelihoods, limiting quality interaction with children.

iii. Reduced Engagement: Many parents rarely attend school meetings, monitor academic progress or engage teachers on their children's welfare.

iv. Weak Support for Discipline: School administrations increasingly encounter resistance from parents whenever disciplinary measures are undertaken, thereby undermining authority structures.

v. Differing Values and Expectations: Diverse family values and parenting styles often create conflicting expectations that affect learners' behaviour.

B. SOCIETY'S IMPACT

i. Economic Hardship: Persistent poverty, unemployment, and inequality create frustrations that often find expression among young people.

ii. Changing Values: Materialism, individualism, and instant gratification have increasingly replaced traditional values of respect, patience, integrity and responsibility.

iii. Weakening Social Norms: Community-based systems that traditionally guided moral behaviour have significantly weakened.

iv. Social Media Influence: Digital platforms expose students to misinformation, unrealistic lifestyles, violence, cyberbullying and anti-authority sentiments.

v. Adults Modelling Conflict Behaviour: Political confrontations, corruption scandals, family conflicts, and societal violence teach young people that aggression is an acceptable way of addressing grievances.

C. ACCUMULATED PRESSURE

i. Frustration: Students experience academic, social, emotional and financial pressures that accumulate over time.

ii. Alienation: Many learners feel unheard, neglected and disconnected from decision-making processes.

iii. Weak Institutional Trust: Students often perceive institutions as unfair, unresponsive or insensitive to their concerns.

iv. Breakdown of Relationships: Poor communication between students, teachers, administrators and parents creates environments conducive to conflict.

D. GOVERNMENT POLICIES

i. Reduced Capitation - Delayed or inadequate funding affects service delivery and institutional management.

ii. 100% Transition Policy - While promoting access, the policy has significantly increased enrolment beyond institutional capacities.

iii. Reduced Teacher Recruitment - Teacher shortages have worsened teacher-student ratios.

iv. Reduced Infrastructure Investments - School facilities have not expanded proportionately with increasing enrolment.

v. Free Education Expansion - **Although commendable, rapid expansion without adequate resources has strained educational systems.**

E. SCHOOL CONDITIONS

i. Overcrowding - Many institutions operate beyond their designed capacities.

ii. Resource Shortages - Insufficient learning materials affect educational quality.

iii. Infrastructure Strain - Dormitories, classrooms, laboratories and sanitation facilities are overstretched.

iv. Administrative Pressure - School leaders face increasing expectations with limited resources.

v. Occasional Mismanagement and Corruption - Instances of financial impropriety erode trust and contribute to tensions.

vi. Inadequate Chaplaincy and Counselling Services - Many schools lack sufficient psychosocial and spiritual support systems.

F. TEACHERS' CHALLENGES

i. High Workload: Teachers handle large classes and numerous administrative responsibilities.

ii. Burnout: Continuous pressure affects morale and effectiveness.

iii. Low Motivation: Inadequate remuneration and limited career progression opportunities affect performance.

iv. Fear of Disciplining Learners: Legal concerns and parental backlash often discourage corrective interventions.

v. Academic Results Pressure: Excessive focus on examination outcomes creates stressful environments.

G. STUDENTS' ISSUES

i. Fear of Missing Out (FOMO): Students experience anxiety arising from social comparisons and digital exposure.

ii. Social Media Influence: Online networks facilitate rapid mobilization for unrest and spread misinformation.

iii. Reduced Attention from Parents and Teachers: Many students feel emotionally neglected.

iv. Indiscipline: Weak value formation contributes to behavioural challenges.

v. Ease of Organizing Intra- and Inter-School Unrest: Technology has simplified coordination of disruptive activities.

vi. Disillusionment Regarding Future Prospects: High unemployment and uncertain economic futures reduce motivation and hope.

4. THE SEVEN RELIGION/SCRIPTURE-BASED INTERVENTION APPROACHES TO MITIGATING UNREST IN LEARNING INSTITUTIONS

1. Restoration of Moral and Ethical Formation

Proverbs 22:6 emphasizes the importance of nurturing children in the right way. Schools should intentionally integrate values education into daily learning.

2. Strengthening Chaplaincy and Spiritual Care

Faith leaders should provide mentorship, counselling and moral guidance to learners.

3. Promoting Reconciliation and Peacebuilding

Matthew 5:9 teaches, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Schools should establish mediation and restorative justice programmes.

4. Encouraging Servant Leadership

Mark 10:45 presents leadership as service. Student leaders should be trained in responsible leadership and conflict resolution.

5. Enhancing Community Responsibility

Ubuntu philosophy and biblical teachings encourage collective responsibility in raising children.

6. Promoting Hope and Purpose

Jeremiah 29:11 reminds young people that they have a future and hope. Career guidance and mentorship programmes should strengthen optimism.

7. Strengthening Prayer, Spiritual Reflection and Character Development

Regular spiritual engagement fosters self-discipline, emotional stability, resilience and responsible decision-making.

5. TEN MAJOR RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Strengthen parental involvement in education.
2. Increase government funding to schools.
3. Recruit more teachers to reduce workload.
4. Expand school infrastructure.
5. Institutionalize counselling and chaplaincy services.
6. Strengthen values-based education.
7. Establish effective student participation mechanisms.
8. Enhance mental health support systems.
9. Promote responsible use of social media.
10. Develop early warning and conflict prevention frameworks.

6. TWENTY ACTION POINTS FOR LEARNING INSTITUTIONS, GOVERNMENT, SOCIETY, PARENTS, TEACHERS, AND STUDENTS

Government

1. Increase capitation funding.
2. Recruit adequate teaching personnel.
3. Expand educational infrastructure.
4. Strengthen school governance oversight.

Learning Institutions

1. Establish active counselling departments.
2. Strengthen chaplaincy programmes.
3. Develop student dialogue forums.
4. Create grievance-handling mechanisms.

Parents

1. Participate actively in school affairs.
2. Prioritize character formation.
3. Monitor children's digital activities.
4. Support legitimate disciplinary processes.

Teachers

1. Foster positive teacher-student relationships.
2. Identify and support at-risk learners.
3. Model ethical behaviour.
4. Embrace mentorship roles.

Society and Faith Communities

1. Promote positive social values.
2. Support youth mentorship programmes.

Students

1. Practice responsible leadership and dialogue.
2. Reject violence and destruction as means of expressing grievances.

7. CONCLUSION

Student unrest in learning institutions across Africa is not merely a manifestation of indiscipline among learners but a reflection of deeper structural, social, economic, moral and governance challenges affecting society. The crisis demands collective responsibility and coordinated interventions from governments, schools, parents, teachers, religious institutions, communities and students themselves.

The future of Africa depends significantly on the stability and effectiveness of its educational institutions. Restoring discipline, trust, accountability, moral values and hope among learners is not optional; it is an urgent necessity. Faith communities, particularly churches and other religious institutions, have a strategic role in nurturing character, promoting peace and rebuilding the social fabric necessary for healthy learning environments.

If Africa is to realize its educational aspirations and developmental goals, stakeholders must move beyond reactive responses and embrace holistic, preventive and values-driven approaches that address the root causes of unrest. Through collective action, servant leadership, ethical governance and spiritual renewal, learning institutions can once again become centres of excellence, peace, innovation and transformation.

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