

Learners as Education Stakeholders: Do They Form Part of Decision-making in South African Schools?

Rebecca Bessong¹, Takalani Mashau² and Peter Mulaudzi³

University of Venda, South Africa

E-mail: ¹<bessong@yahoo.com>, ²<takalani.mashau@univen.ac.za>, ³<peter.mulaudzi@univen.ac.za>

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ABSTRACT Education systems all over the world are composed of different stakeholders. These stakeholders vary according to countries. In some countries, stakeholders are identified and categorised and their roles and functions are stipulated, whereas in other countries, stakeholders are just recognised as mere entities without stipulating their roles and functions. Different stakeholders in education cannot be ignored as they play a very important and meaningful role in the provision of quality education. Stakeholders in this paper are learners because they mean a lot in education; without them, schools cannot exist. In this conceptual paper, researchers through literature review, investigated how schools value the contributions of learners in decision making as members of School Governing Bodies (SGB). The paper also investigated challenges that confront learners in participating in decision making within the SGB.

INTRODUCTION

The United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child (UNCROC 1989) provided an international human rights context for promoting the participation of children and young people in decision-making:

- *Article 12 of this convention protects the right of children to express their views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.*
- *Article 13 protects the right of children to freedom of expression, including freedom to seek, receive and impart information and ideas of all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child's choice.*

This means that the rights of children under the age of 18 should be recognised and protected. This can be done in no better way than allowing children to participate in decision-making processes on school issues that affect them.

The notion of stakeholder participation in the running of schools has taken on greater current

cy, emerging as a fundamental tenet in the promotion of good school governance. This follows the increasing decentralisation of power and responsibilities to school governing bodies to which learners are members (Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004). It can be argued that through such participation, learners are offered an opportunity to make contributions to decisions which affects them. In this paper, learner participation in decision-making refers to the work of the RCLs in every aspect of school governance, including issues of learner welfare, administration and curriculum.

Democratic Concepts Envisaging Decision Making

In this section, democratic concepts which go along with decision making by learners are discussed.

Learner Participation

According to Jeruto and Kiprop (2011), learner participation in decision-making refers to the work of student representative bodies (in this paper, the RCLs). They further explained that it is also a term used to encompass all aspects of school life and decision-making where students may make a contribution, informally through individual negotiation as well as formally through purposely-created structures and

Address for correspondence:
Takalani Mashau
University of Venda,
South Africa
E-mail: takalani.mashau@univen.ac.za

mechanisms. Learner participation also refers to the participation of learners in collective decision-making at school or class level and as a dialogue between students and other decision-makers, consultants or a survey among students.

Cockburn (2006) in Mcube and Harber (2013) found that the learners' voices are effective when they attend meetings, but are even more so when the learners actively take part in shaping the agenda of the meetings concerned. Further, he devised three definitions of involvement, namely: opportunity - where learners are given the opportunity to attend meetings; attendance - where learners take up that opportunity; and engagement - whereby learners not only attend, but are also given a chance to make effective contributions in meetings.

Satisfaction

Black and Gregersen (1997) saw satisfaction as the level of approval when comparing an outcome with one's expectations. In support of participatory decision-making, Black and Gregersen (1997) explained that the degree of involvement in generating alternatives, planning and evaluating results is related significantly to satisfaction.

Satisfaction, in this paper, is considered as the desired fulfillment learners attain from the degree of involvement they enjoy in school governance decision-making. The degree of involvement they enjoy will be looked at in relation to when decisions are arrived at in learner welfare, administration and curriculum matters.

Decision-making

In a true democratic process, decisions are made by using all the creative forces and the authority of the participants who are involved in making those decisions (Mintz 2014). Decision making comes through participation. Heler et al. (2011) defined participation as the totality of forms, that is, direct (personal) or indirect (through representatives or institutions) and of intensities; that is, ranging from minimal to comprehensive by which individuals, groups, collectives secure their interest or contribute to the choice process through self-determined choices among possible actions during the decision process.

Haridimos (2010) defined decision-making as the commitment to action, and that it consists of

locating, articulating and ratifying an earlier choice, bringing it forward to the present and claiming it as the choice that has just been made. Haridimos (2010) added that whenever people are involved in decision-making, what really happens is that they are working retrospectively. When one feels compelled to declare that a decision has been made, the gist of that feeling is some outcome at hand that must have been occasioned by some earlier choice. In this paper, decision-making is considered as the act of (all school governors) jointly making a choice.

School Governance

Governance, according to Hanson (1998), was control over the decision making process. Maile (2002) regarded school governance as an act of determining policy and rules by which a school is to be organised and controlled. It included ensuring that such rules and policies are carried out effectively in terms of the law and budget of the school.

According to McLennan (2000), school governance in South Africa is primarily about the distribution of authority and voice. Authority, he says, included explicit authority such as financial and policy decisions as well as implicit authority involving the cultures and values that determine the ethos (characteristic spirit of a culture) of a school. The underlying principle he explained is that of ensuring that educators, parents, learners and non-teaching staff actively participate in the governance and management of schools with a view to providing a better teaching and learning environment.

According to Mcube and Harber (2013), the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (hereinafter, Schools Act of 1996) mandated that secondary school learners, who are members of a Representative Council of Learners (RCL), should be part of school governance through participating in SGBs. Participation by the learners in governance processes is intended to provide the necessary space for them to acquire democratic capacity and leadership skills. The Department of Education provides the Guides for RCLs document and outlines the following main functions of RCLs:

- An RCL acts as an important instrument for liaison and communication;
- An RCL meets at regular intervals, as determined by its constitution, to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and com-

plaints that it receives from its constituency; and

- After every meeting, an RCL gives feedback to the learners concerned.

In this paper, governance (in relation to learner participation in decision-making in the SGB) means participation in distributed authority - an authority (legislative mandate) to give and take an argument that is respectful of reasonable difference.

School Governors

School governors are people who have an interest in the role of schools in their community and want to make a positive contribution to the success of local schools and improve the educational standards and achievements of their pupils (Towerhamlets 2012). This pertained to all the members of a school governing body (elected parents of learners, learner representatives, teaching and non-teaching staff of a school and any co-opted community member). In this paper, the school governors are principals, teachers, parents and RCL.

Learner Participation According to International Conventions and National Laws

The UNCROC of 1989 can be likened to a wakeup call for some parts of the globe where children's voices on issues which impact on them were non-existent. Studies by Phaswana (2010), Jeruto and Kiprop (2011) and Mager and Nowak (2012), just to name but a few, have shown that there are enormous benefits if learners have a say in decision-making on issues which affect them.

For many years, South African secondary school learners have been dissatisfied with the fact that decisions affecting them were being taken without their input. From the 1970s through to the 1980s and even after 1996, many different student organisations such as the South African Student Organisation (SASO), South African Student Movement (SASM), Student Representative Councils (SRC), Prefect Bodies, and Representative Council of Learners (RCLs) have been struggling to make their voice heard. The climax of their action was the Soweto uprising of 16 June 1976 (Kallaway 1984 in Nongubo 2004).

With the onset of democracy in South Africa in 1994, there have been overwhelming changes

in several aspects of the socio-economic and political life in the country. The education system like many other social institutions had suffered from a top-down form of management and governance prior to 1994. Therefore, South African education system embarked on a democratisation process with the dawn of democracy in 1994 (van Wyk 2004).

The concept of decentralisation originates from the belief that the state alone cannot control schools but should share its power with other stakeholders, particularly those closer to the school, on a partnership basis (Marishane 1999). From such devolution of power, a stronger and healthier relationship is likely to be built between schools and communities, and this would provide an alternative form of accountability to bureaucratic surveillance. This is based on the premise that when all concerned collaborate in making important decisions about educational alternatives, a true mutual responsibility grows.

Section 2 of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 (herein after Constitution of 1996) stated that the Constitution is the supreme law of the Republic, law or conduct inconsistent with it is invalid, and the obligations imposed by it must be fulfilled. The country is one sovereign democratic state founded on values of human dignity, equality, human rights and freedom. Chapter two of the Constitution, which is the Bill of Rights, is the cornerstone of democracy in the country as it affirms these democratic values of Sections 9, 10 and 12, that is, human dignity, equality and freedom.

With the adoption of a constitutional dispensation and the launching of education legislations such as National Policy Education Act of 1996 and Schools Act of 1996, a novel system of education and training was born in South Africa. This new system of education and training was based on the fundamental principles of democracy, unity, non-discrimination, equity and equality (Squelch 2000). This signified the government's commitment to develop a democratic system of school governance which allows for the participation of all stakeholders with a vested interest in education. In this regard, the South African policy on education embraces the 1989 UNCROC provisions on the right of children to participate in decision-making on matters that affect them.

Learner participation in decision-making in South Africa was legislated in 1996 through the

Schools Act of 1996. This Act mandated the establishment of SGBs that comprise parents, educators, non-educators and learners from the eighth grade or higher (DoE 1996), and this is how the establishment and recognition of the Representative Councils for Learners (RCL) as part of the SGBs in secondary schools came to be. Thus, through this representation, the Schools Act of 1996 allowed learners, as stakeholders, to participate in the governance of their schools.

Upon the establishment and recognition of the RCL as part of the SGBs in secondary schools, the Department of Education formulated Guides to assist the RCLs to function properly. The Guides (DoE 1999) spelled out the following as the main functions of the RCL: an RCL acts as an important instrument for liaison and communication; an RCL meets at fairly regular intervals, as determined by its constitution, to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and even complaints from its constituencies; and after every meeting, the RCL gives feedback to the learners.

If an idea is turned down, the RCL must try to explain why an approval was not granted. If an idea is approved, it must be conveyed to the professional management and the SGB, where applicable. If they approve the idea, it becomes part of the school policy, if applicable; if they do not approve the idea, the principal must explain the reason for this decision to the council, who, in turn, must inform its constituency.

From the main functions of the RCL, as stipulated in the Guides, a problem immediately surfaces. Although it is stated in SASA that learners must be members of SGBs – the decision-making machinery of schools, there is no provision for RCLs to participate in decision-making procedures. Its first function is that it acts as an instrument of communication or a go-between or a messenger between the SGB and the learners. In carrying out the function of giving feedback to the learners, in the case where an idea from the RCL is not accepted by the SGB, ‘the principal must explain the reason for this decision to the RCL, who, in turn, must inform its members.’ With this understanding, therefore, the crucial questions to ask are: (i) Why would the RCL be absent when the SGB is taking decisions on learner issues? (ii) Are the Guidelines on RCLs explicit enough for the learners to understand their role in school governance? (iii)

Do the roles in the Guides really make provision for democratic participation, as pronounced by the ANC Policy Guidelines? (iv) Are children’s rights to make input in decision-making which impacts on them being respected, as stipulated by UNCROC (1989)? (v) Do the Guides give room for other school governing authorities to treat learner representatives as equal partners?

Wellton and Rashid (1996) explained that the England and Wales education Act of 1992 devolved power from the Local Education Authority (LEA) to governing bodies (school councils) in an attempt to empower parents. This implied strategic and operational decisions to be taken as close as possible to where they must be implemented, thus placing emphasis on consumer (parents) rather than on producer (LEA). According to Wellton and Rashid (1996), the majority of educators saw such council as essential in giving a voice to the learners. The schools realised that the success of school councils depends on establishing a high level of trust between teachers and learners.

Davies (1998) in Carr (2005) advised that school council agendas should include both learners’ immediate concerns and school policy issues. Davies’ suggestion pointed to the idea that learners should be included in school councils because there is none other than learners that can best articulate their immediate concerns. Most of the countries that uphold democratic values acknowledge that schools can be the most systematic of institutions that can directly be responsible for imparting citizenship and democratic norms. They are said to be the best equipped to assess the cognitive aspects of good citizenship, critical thinking, deliberation and the ability to enter into dialogue with others who have different perspectives.

Learner Participation in Decision Making: The Theoretical Perspective

Deliberative democrats such as Rawls (1972), Benhabib (1992), Habermas (1996), and Young (2000), stated that the theory of deliberative democracy pertains to the capacity of those affected by a collective decision to deliberate in the production of that decision. They contended that deliberation involves discussion in which individuals are amenable to scrutinising and changing their preferences in the light of persuasion (but not manipulation, deception or

coercion) from other participants. They further explained that the process of the formation of the will, the particular moment that precedes choice, in which an individual or a group ponders different solutions before settling for one, is referred to as deliberation (Dryzek and List 2002).

This notion is supported by Elster (1998) who affirmed that actual deliberation consists of the give and take of an argument that is respectful of reasonable difference. The participants involved in the argument regard one another as formally and substantively equal. They are formally equal in that the rules regulating the ideal procedure do not single out individuals for some special advantage or disadvantage. Instead, everyone with deliberative capacities is recognised as having equal standing at each stage of the deliberative process.

Miller (2000) contended that deliberative democracy is a model of democratic decision-making. In this system, decisions reached should reflect open discussions among the participants - people who are ready to listen to the views and consider the interests of others and modify their own opinions accordingly. Miller (2010), however, warned that in a deliberative democracy, the final decision made may not be wholly consensual, but should represent a fair balance between the different views expressed during the discussion to the extent that even those who would prefer some other outcome can recognise the decision as legitimate.

In relation to this paper, therefore, the extent to which learners in the SGB deliberate in decision-making is to be looked into is explored. RCLs should not be dummy structures just because policy demands their existence in schools. Learners in RCLs are supposed to actually actively participate in decision-making, and the arena for this must be set by adult governors of schools.

Mncube (2008) explained that the theories of democracy and social justice cannot be separated, especially when issues of representation and participation are deliberated. Theories of social justice propose adequate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all. These mechanisms, in the present study, refer to the manner of participation of all stakeholders in school governance, as mandated by the SASA. Such participation takes issues of power relations among adult and learner governors into consideration.

Gwewirtz et al. (1995) held that social justice has two social dimensions - distributional and rational dimensions. They cited Rawls (1972) who explained the distributional dimension as follows:

The subject matter of justice is the basic structure of the society that is, the way in which the major institutions ...distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine distribution of advantages from social co-operation.

In relation to this paper, the Constitution of 1996 distributed the fundamental rights of human dignity, equality and freedom to all citizens. The Schools Act of 1996 mandated that these rights be exercised by school governors in carrying out their duties of governing schools. Each individual governor is expected to uphold the others' rights of human dignity, equality and freedom. By doing so, the entire society eventually benefits from interacting and co-operating with one another.

The relational aspect of social justice has to do with procedural rights and is concerned with ordering social relations according to formal and informal rules that govern the way in which members of the society treat each other at both micro and macro-levels. This dimension is holistic and focuses on the interconnection among individuals (Mncube 2008).

In the present work, this is in light of arriving at decisions in school governance, following the procedures in the Schools Act of 1996, be it from the election of the various governors to decisions taken and implemented. Thus, the culture of functioning according to procedure, respecting each governor's rights and treating each one as an equal partner in the governance of a particular school (micro level) will filtrate through the communities in which these individuals live and interact and into the society as a whole.

Learner Participation

Research has shown that learner participation in school governance has been relegated to the background by other governing authorities like educators, school management teams (SMTs) and parents for different reasons (Nongubo 2004; Mncube 2008; Jeruto and Kiprop 2011). In the researchers' opinion, the building of a future society lies in the manner in which children are trained. If children are exposed to the democratic values of equality, equity, tolerance and respect, they grow up embracing these

value. The old adage 'experience is the best teacher' captures it all. There is no better place or way of teaching and inculcating good values in children than in schools through allowing them meaningful participation in governance. This participation should not be tokenistic or minimal but maximal, as Mathebula (2005) averred. The benefits of these will be seen in the way learners carry themselves, interact, relate and co-operate with other people later in life.

There are a number of studies in which researchers advocate for maximum learner participation in school governance. Nongubo (2004) was concerned with the incidents of violence and unrest in spite of the fact that the new and democratic South Africa allows learners, through representation, to participate in the governance of their schools. Carr and Williams (2009) were also perplexed with what goes wrong from central government to institutional level (from policy to practice). Mabovula (2009), referring to learners as 'the voiceless', cried out loud that they should be given a chance to speak and that their voices should be heard.

Many countries in the world acknowledge and uphold learners' rights to participate in decision-making on issues which affect them. For this reason, learners are members of the school governing authorities in such countries. Studies by Moos and Dempster (1998), Welton and Rashid (1996), Baron (1981) and Jeruto and Kiprop (2011) testified to the existence of such participation. However, countries like Sweden, England and Wales still do not make any provision for learner representation and participation in school governance.

In the South African context, there is a general conviction that secondary school learners have earned a right to be heard through their participation in the liberation of the country (Sot-hole 1995 in Mncube 2008; Phaswana 2010). It is, therefore, puzzling why some school governing bodies stifle the opportunities open to the learners to exercise these rights. Much has been written on various aspects of South African school governance such as school governance policy and practice, the rights and roles of parents in SGB, the role of the learner in SGB, giving voices to the voiceless, issues of social justice and the voice of the learner, and perceptions on learner participation by Grant-Lewis and Naidoo (2004), van Wyk (2007), Xaba (2011), Mabovula (2009), Mncube (2008) and Nongubo (2004).

Meaningful learner participation in decision-making in schools on matters which concern them is a long standing problem faced by many RCLs in South African schools. Studies by Sithole (1995), Mathebula (2008) and Carr (2005) highlighted this issue. Schools in the Limpopo Province are no exception to this problem. For example, Phaswana's study on youth participation experiences in the school, municipality and youth organisations in the Limpopo Province, revealed that youth participation in these settings is fraught with practical difficulties (Phaswana 2010).

Through the perceptions of school principals, Mabovula investigated the role of learners in the governance of five secondary schools in the Mthatha area of the Eastern Cape. Mabovula (2009) explained that learners should not only have a structure on the SGB but should be able to argue deliberatively. Her findings revealed that generally, there is limited democratic participation of learners in decision-making, improper communication, no deliberative democratic practice and a lack of trust among SGB members in the schools she investigated. One, therefore, wonders if these manifest as a result of the fact that learners in school governance do not understand their role or they do not understand but accept and are satisfied with the manner in which adult governors treat them (learners).

The democratic government of South Africa is equally aware of unique capabilities of schools. This is the reason for its education system through SASA making provision for a formal learner body – the RCL. SASA mandates learner participation in decision-making on matters which concern them. Through this participation, learners can become engaged in critical thinking, deliberations as well as in dialogue with those who have different perspectives (adult governors).

Challenges Limiting Learner Participation in School Governance

The role of learners in school governance in South Africa has been widely debated in line with the mismatch between policy and practice (Nongubo 2004; Mncube 2008; Mabovula 2009). Their findings point to the fact that adult governors consider learner representatives as 'troublemakers', minors, immature, inexperienced and lacking in knowledge. Hence, learners have not

been considered as equals when it comes to decision-making. How then will the trumpet sound of democratic participation in education management by the ANC 1992 Policy Guidelines be heeded?

According to RAPCAN (2014), the Schools Act of 1996 progressive framework is based on the assumption that learner representatives, once elected, will be able to participate fully in school decision-making processes. However, in practice, their capacity to be part of a governing body and to have their views legitimately heard, is often constrained.

A number of factors concerning the broader functioning of school governing bodies can undermine the nature and extent of learners' participation and decision-making in practice. Examples are: a rigid implementation of the rules, roles and responsibilities stipulated in Schools Act of 1996 may ignore the diverse cultures, gender relations, traditional values/customs, community dynamics, variations in socio-economic and historical contexts that impact school communities and prevent learners from freely voicing their opinions. Furthermore, there is a general lack of consensus on what democratic decision-making means. Schools suffer from incapacity to govern as a result of stipulated specialised functions and lack of training in Schools Act of 1996. Finally, principals are often reluctant to create a space for debate and dialogue to ensure participation of all stakeholders (RAPCAN 2014).

Learners are also faced with barriers that undermine their abilities and hinder meaningful learner participation such as: difficulty in challenging traditional institutionalized procedures and power relations between adults and learners, lack of support and guidance in understanding the concepts of leadership and democracy, and limited understanding of their participation roles.

As such, these deep structural issues affect the functioning of School Governing Bodies and, consequently, of the participation of learners in these settings. RAPCAN's (2014) research findings are as follows: learners do not understand their roles and functions as RCL members; there is lack of RCL support and recognition by adults at the school which undermines learners' right to authentic participation in school governance; adults recognize the importance of learner engagement but have a limited understanding of

learner participation in school governance, which undermines the capabilities of learners to participate; RCL members' ability to participate in school governance is hampered by adults' traditional views on the place of children in society; learner participation in School Governing Bodies was also affected by internal conflicts between the adults on these Boards; and Governing Body parents also do not understand their role and function on the boards, and are sometimes excluded from the decision-processes of the school.

Adults undermined learners by criticizing and blaming them for lack of effectiveness in the RCL structures. RCL structures appeared to receive attention only when they were required for tokenistic participation. Adults felt that RCL member participation on School Governing Bodies should be limited to information sharing, occasional consultation on their opinion or views, but should not include the right to influence decisions. Although adults acknowledged their role in creating barriers to effective RCL learner participation, there was no critical reflection of their own views and attitudes of learner participation in school governance. This reflection is important as it has implications on how adult participants support or hinder learner participation and effective functioning of RCL structures. Adults are not fully convinced that learners have the ability to participate in decision-making, and adults are not ready to share the school space as equal decision-making partners with RCL learners (RAPCAN 2014).

CONCLUSION

SGBs are composed of parents, teachers, non-teaching staff members as well as learners in South African secondary schools. When SGBs are constituted, learners' representative council is represented by at least two members. In most cases, when SGB meetings are held, learners are not invited to these meetings. In these meetings, decisions are taken, and learners are left out. It is, therefore, necessary for SGB chairpersons and secretaries, together with principals, to invite learners in all meetings so that learners should form part of decision making as they are representative of a very important stakeholder.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper recommends that learners should be given chance to participate in the SGB meetings. Meetings should be held after school when learners will have an opportunity to be part of the meetings. Participation in such meetings will satisfy learners, and they will feel respected by the elders. Learners should be part of decisions taken in the meetings. It should borne in mind that learners are part and parcel of the School Governing Body, are part of school governance, and they are governors too.

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