

Configuring Space for Learner Participation in School Governance

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ABSTRACT Education reforms are a recurring process that becomes more pronounced when there is change of government. This is the case in South Africa with drastic political changes in the country ushering in major changes in education. The birth of School Governing Bodies (SGB's) is one such change and it brought democracy in governance of schools with learners assigned a prominent role to play through the learner representatives. The study seeks to determine whether the learner representatives were in a position to play their assigned roles. Critical Theory was used within qualitative methodology. Results confirmed that learner representatives were not empowered to take their rightful place in school governance. Recommendations are based on findings.

INTRODUCTION

Literature on the revolutionary stance of the youth of South Africa against autocracy of the government in the governance and administration of educational institutions is well underway, both in the country and at global level. The ushering in of democracy and the Constitution, 108 of 1996, brought about significant changes to a system that was embedded with autocracy and travesty of governance and introduced legislation that would facilitate development of the youth and other minorities in management. Laws were passed and among them was the South African School Act (SASA), Act 84 of 1996 which aims to provide democratic governance of schools through compulsory representation and participation of all stakeholders. Karlson (2002) asserts that the primary aim of the reforms in school governance was to democratise the schooling system of South Africa and to get rid of autocracy and the disparities that glared in the past regime. Schools are currently menaced by uprisings and this emanates largely by the exclusionary manner in which the schools are run. Diskiene and Pauliene (2014) that argue traditional manners of leading have consequences that are undesirable and thwarting the progress of any institution. Such leadership and management styles do not accommodate younger participants in management of institutions. This is a common phenomenon in South Africa today in spite of the clear stipulation in many policies that are in place.

Through this Act, the position of learners was purportedly established in school governance. Section 23(2) of the SGB guidelines provides for the participation of learners in the SGBs through their democratically elected representatives. The Act mandates the participation of different stakeholders, among them representation by learners from Grade 8 upwards. The Act was promulgated at a time that was marked with euphoria over the transition to democracy and well-meant, but sometimes ambitious, plans which have not always translated into reality. Since 1994 the government of South Africa has not been impervious to the importance of the involvement of the youth in all structures of decision-making. This is shown in the various modes of recognition given to the youth through the different structures of government, for example the different youth league bodies associated with the different political parties.

The formation of SGBs points to the importance of recognising all members of the school community as equally important and indispensable in the successful functioning of the school. It is crucial that members of the SGB be prepared for what is required of the position through training and to ensure that the school functions efficiently. Through training each member is helped to develop the latent potential to perform and contribute to the democratic governance of the school (Maile 2002; Ngidi 2004). They aver that the preparation and introduction of ideology decide the possible behaviour that is shown by the recipient. They refer to Vygotsky (1978: 339)

who says: The emotional experience, arising from any situation or from any aspect of his environment determines how best a child will handle future life problems. Therefore, it is not any of the factors (if taken without reference to the future) that carves the course of his development, but the same factors refracted through the prism of the child's emotional stand". Without a proper plan to train the learners and other less empowered members of the SGB, reaching the efficiency that the SASA prescribes remains a mirage. Kgaffe (2001) believes that provision is made by the Act for the training of SGB members. The trajectory on the implementation of the SASA should be well in advance, but some schools seem to be lagging behind. Those who have had prior experience have to help their successors to close the gap that exists between discourse and reality; this is the idea in which SGBs should play the major role.

Learner representatives, as minors in the situation, should be involved in the discourse that informs decision-making in the schools. Leclau (1981: 1976) argues that the discourse should graduate into a discursive and he describes the discursive thus: "...the discursive ...is nothing which in a narrow sense relates to texts but the ensemble of phenomena of societal production of meaning of a society as such is based". Through the discursive, history of a society is built. The function of the SGB is to build a calibre of young people who will carry on the task of nation-building way beyond the existence of the present cohort of leaders and contribute to the building of a better society. The South African government, therefore, identified and endorsed the participation of learner representatives and other weaker links of the SGB through the promulgation of SASA and, emphatically so, through Section 23 that deals with learner involvement. It is evident that, in some schools, the good intentions of government, which manifested in the promulgation of SASA, have not succeeded in creating the envisaged conducive and enabling environment for learner representatives to be shaped and honed to make worthwhile contributions to school governance. Fua (2007) places equal treatment of all members of society at the top of the list for all those who aspire for social justice and adds that social justice should benefit also those who are least advantaged. Learner representatives, as the youngest members of the SGB, and because of their

dependence on the teachers and principals to obtain good grades and to progress in their education, pass the test to be labelled the least advantaged. Grant Lewis and Naidoo (2004) argue that the envisaged result of democratic participation is usually relinquished in pursuit of other gains.

Research Question

Are learner representatives ready for the roles they are meant to play in the SGBs in South African schools?

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to gain insight into the experience of learner representatives in the SGB of sixteen schools of the Engcobo district and to examine the role played by principals' as ex-officio members to ensure participation of the learner representatives.

Literature Review

The main research question is: Do learner representatives exercise their role as prescribed by the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996? In response to this question an in-depth study of literature was undertaken. A literature review guided the researcher in establishing how the SGBs came into being. Heystek (2001: 27) states that SGBs were established with the aim to democratise the South African schools and to widen participation through the involvement of all sectors of the school population in the management and governance of the schools. The obligation of the principal in developing and assisting especially the student representative is clearly enunciated.

Literature intimates that the objectives of democracy and broader participation, as anticipated, remain subordinate to the interests of principals. Grant et al. (2004: 102) aver thus: "The reality is that these are focussed on supporting efficient functioning of the school organisation with little regard to extending democratic participation."

Christie (2008: 156) found that the South African government has not designed policies and education laws that address the reality of the situation with regard to education in this country. He argues that South Africa adopts conven-

tional methods and policies, and that the education system reflects ideas drawn from Western countries and does not engage with local classroom realities.

Sayed (2001) echoes the sentiment forwarded by Christie (2008) saying that it is short-sighted to believe that a new policy will lead to enactment and bring about change if it was not been designed to suit the set objective. It is the task of the school to develop the learners to enable them to participate in the democratic processes and in the running of the school. In this regard, Fataar (2009: 07) proposes that learners should be supported towards realising construction of self in their daily encounters with specific lived spaces. In their term of office as representatives in the SGB opportunities should be maximised for learner representatives to discover their potential and build their integrity. Steinmann (2007: 2) takes this further in the analogy of the lioness and her cubs saying: *“The survival and competence of her cubs represent success in the fascinating life-cycle of nature – ultimately; their success ensures the future and sustainability of the pride.”*

This analogy can be applied to the role of the adult members of the SGBs, especially the principals, who should develop the learners to participate fully in their designated roles. If the cohort of learner representatives is properly trained, they will be able to contribute to the process and to develop their own lives based on the office they had occupied as members of the school governing body. Ngcobo (2002) emphatically states that it is the schools’ obligation to promote the democratic rights of learners and to assist them to participate fruitfully in deciding matters that affect them. Participation can be practised through different styles which are influenced by different philosophies.

By virtue of their positions in the schools, principals tacitly consent to assist learners to develop to their full potential. Therefore, the expectation is there that the principals and other members of the SGB will assist the learner representatives and present them with opportunities to grow; develop skills and gain confidence to participate and contribute to decision-making in the governance of the school. With SASA having set out the role of learner representatives in the governance of schools, learner participation should have been in place by now. Louw (2010: 73) argues that training and creating new “in-

telligentsia” should be at the top of the list of social functions to be attained by higher education; he adds further that there is a need for the 21st century student to play an important role as part of the planning team.

Ramadikela (2012) laments the lack of enthusiasm to ensure participation by all those who have been elected as members of school governing body and, specifically, the unenthusiastic participation of learners as members of the SGB.

Theoretical Framework

The researcher used critical emancipatory theory for this study to achieve praxis, thus enabling the participants to claim the power and develop the know-how to take action against oppression and liberates themselves through participation in their education (Giroux 2011). Freire (1970) endorses students’ ability to think critically about their education and other life situations. Through praxis learners can attain Freire’s aim, in that they will develop skills to think and participate actively in their education. Praxis involves engaging in a cycle of theory, application, evaluation, reflection and then back to theory. Giroux (2011) endorsed the foregoing view in the explanation of the critical theory in the view that is embodied and is much appropriate to this study in the following words. “Critical theory is an educational movement, guided by passion and principle, to help students develop consciousness of freedom that recognises authoritarian tendencies, and connects knowledge to power and the ability to take constructive action.”

Learner representatives have a legal standing in the SGBs as prescribed by the South African Schools’ Act no 84 of 1996. This is in line with global trends as observed by Carter et al. (2003). Active and meaningful participation of learner representatives in the SGBs would accelerate the view of the contemporary critical pedagogues, like McLaren (2000) who criticise those who resist change and, therefore, further endorse Freire (1970) who argues that democracy allows disruption of all oppressive regimes and it opens gets to change and participatory systems. It endorses the aim of the SASA namely, to inculcate democratic governance of schools.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Research was conducted through qualitative methods. The aim was to understand the work of the SGBs and to discern the level of participation of the learner representatives. Time was spent listening to participants and recording their responses. This was placed on understanding the role and actions of learner representatives and the impact of their participation or lack thereof on the SGBs in the chosen schools. Of great interest was whether they get any induction and support towards attaining the competencies they need to perform the tasks that they are expected to perform. As DeVos et al. (2011: 74) notes, qualitative research stems from the interpretive paradigm whose emphasis is on understanding social life and the meaning that is attached to it by those who have interest in the environment as it benefits them. Participants in qualitative research methodology use words to describe what they have observed empirically. Qualitative data is defined as empirical information about the world. Ramadikela (2012: 3) asserts that through qualitative research the researcher can explore the life worlds of participants. Punch (2009: 117) endorses this view saying that qualitative research is holistic, allowing the researcher to study people's attitudes and aspirations in their natural settings.

Sampling

Springer (2010: 100) explains that the researcher identifies the population that will give meaning to the investigation at hand and who can relate to the relevant questions. The population consist of all the schools in the Engcobo district of the Eastern Cape. Denzin and Lincoln (2005) point out that a sample is a means to explain facets of the whole population from which generalisation will be made. The researcher worked through purposive sampling technique. The researcher had a prior exposure to the schools in the chosen district. As a frequent visitor to the area the prospective participants and the researcher knew one another. It was easy to select a sample that comprised elements of the population that are considered to be information rich about the topic. De Vos et al. (2011: 2002). Burke and Larry (2011: 217) argue that among other non-random sampling techniques is purposive sampling which targets a particular

group that is seen to be well placed to respond to the questions about the study.

Population

The study was conducted in sixteen schools of the Engcobo district. Sixteen principals from different schools participated; the group of principals consisted of twelve males and four females. Seven of the male principals have been in the position long before 1994, the birth of democracy in South Africa and therefore long before the introduction of the School Governing Bodies. The teachers' ages ranged between thirty one and forty three years. The non-teaching staff members were made factotums in the chosen schools. The parent cohort was made up of sixteen parents from the locality of the schools. Two learner representatives from each of sixteen schools all between the ages of seventeen and twenty one years participated. Females and males equally shared the size of the sample, this being a deliberate choice to allow equal gender representation.

Ethical Considerations

Assurance was given to prospective participants that all information would remain confidential and no participant would be harmed physically.

Data Collection

Focus groups were formed of learner representatives; non-teaching staff members as well as parent representatives, respectively. Although all members of the SGB have equal through a legal imperative, Mahlangu (2008) observed that parents in historically disadvantaged schools still do not have the confidence to exercise the authority vested in them. The same can be said of learner representatives, who view the principal and the other members of the SGB as their superiors and would not dare challenge their word and views. For this reason these groups of "weaker" participants were placed in focus groups so that they could draw strength from one another as members of a given group. It was interesting to listen to some learner representatives expressing the view that this forum allowed them the opportunity to speak freely, without being constantly corrected by teachers and principals about the way they expressed

themselves, which is one of the reasons they were reluctant to voice their views in the SGB meetings.

Principals were visited and interviewed in their offices, at their own convenience. This arrangement presented settings where principals could give their own views within their own private spaces. This afforded the researcher the opportunity to be imbued in the setting environment and to be as close to the understanding of the role of principals as is humanly possible. The setting allowed for and worked well with the use of unstructured interviews and naturalistic observations of SGB meetings. Educator participants were also interviewed at venues of their own choice, away from the staff room and the prying eyes of other educators and learners. Individual interviews were conducted and educators were encouraged to express their honest opinions even if those views were contrary to the views of other members of the SGB.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Most of the principals were expected to train the SGB as daunting in the midst of their busy schedules. They saw the learner representatives as more of trouble makers and bullies elected by others because they feared them. Principal AP had this to say: 'Hay; these children are actually those who are most difficult, they take years repeating one class. If you want instigators and ring leaders, it is them.' Principal G said: 'I do my bit, but I do not have all the time. Sometimes there are urgent matters that need immediate attention. You can't but call the few people you can get hold of; a teacher or parents that are available at the time. I mean, some people work and these children sometimes are absent or they are in class and school governance matters can't be at a standstill because they are not there. Principals feel that they have a prerogative to execute duties of management and governance with or without the other members. This goes with the view that learner representatives cannot be expected to govern, they are young. Principal, Y argue that without experience, they can never be able to make meaningful contribution to school governance. He argues thus: "Experience is the best teacher In my twenty years of principalship, some of things I just learnt through trial and error, using my experience; This independence makes people think that every-

one should take a chance; everything democracy, democracy; ha ha (It can't work). In the old Transkei, students were students and there was order. Anyway, maybe things will go wrong before they come right".

Teacher representatives echoed the thinking of the principals though interviewed at a different time and different place. Teachers were more intolerant of the idea that they have to share the space of school governance with learners. In school X the teacher said: "It is a real waste of time to think that schools can be governed by children. They do not even understand a simple comprehension or theorem in class, it's a burden that we place on them- they can't manage. What is democracy sometimes I think our government understands democracy wrongly. Actually I want out of this joke of SGB- trying to deal with complicated issues with children".

The teacher in question was not even prepared to go to the end with the interview. In his view this is an idea that should not be entertained because it will not bear any fruit. When asked the question: Do you train learner representatives for their roles in the School Governing Bodies? Principal C responded thus: "I must say that this properly done can benefit our youth, however the way it was introduced forced it out of perspective. To come to your question, yes I try but the other people like teachers and even parents are not really supportive of the idea. I try to use Saturdays because Mondays to Fridays are jam packed you can't. What you get is one group on Saturday another group the other Saturday- It just doesn't work. The other thing is that learner representatives are in the forefront of the disturbances for example in the schools."

Learner representatives reported that they were ridiculed and felt humiliated many a time during discussions in SGB meetings. They expressed discouragement and could not wait to reach the end of their tenure. They reported that many discussions took place without them making any contribution. They find themselves isolated by the system that requires them to be involved in a governance structure with no the support or appreciation for the effort they make. The leadership styles practiced by the principals of the Engcobo district, displayed curious resemblances that typically exclude the learner representatives from governance.

The findings of the study depict a picture that is contrary to the objectives of SASA, which is to purge the schools of the tyrannical and non-transparent tendencies of governance. It is evident that principals take the lead in the work of SGBs in the district of Engcobo; however, the style of leadership is laden with autocracy. It is a common thread that runs through the responses of participants that principals take decisions without including learner representatives. This leaves the learner representatives with no option but to endorse the wishes and decisions that ensue from discussions they did not participate in. In some instances they find themselves in the awkward position where they have to ratify a decision that does not benefit the community of learners or contributes to the enhancement of democratic forces in the school.

CONCLUSION

Having interactions with those in the management of schooling portrays an imperative call to involve learners in the governance of schools in South Africa. This is line with the opening of opportunities for participation by the all the citizens in the development and shaping of South African society. Resistance by those who still subscribe to the tendencies of the past stifle the inevitable in the running of schools in the country. Emphasis and strict adherence to the laws of the day are the main measures to apply to facilitate the process of change.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Learner representatives should be motivated to commit to the successful implementation of the SASA prescriptions in the schools. This can be achieved by:

- ♦ Training them in the contents of SASA and other Governance strategies.
- ♦ Inviting them to all meetings in good time and involving them in the compilation of the agenda.
- ♦ Inviting and responding to the contributions they make during their original ideas whenever possible.
- ♦ Encouraging conferences and seminars for all learner representatives in the district to share ideas among themselves and with the principals of different schools.

Principals as ex-officio members of the SGBs have a duty to train the Learner representatives. They have to create enabling environments without which the plan for participatory governance by all stakeholders remains a mirage.

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