

Stakeholders' Perceptions and Experiences of Learners' Involvement in Democratic School Governance in South Africa

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KEYWORDS School Governing Bodies. Decision-making. Devolution of Powers. Representation. Participation

ABSTRACT This is a qualitative study that used interviews and observations in two provinces of South Africa. The investigation considered the views of various stakeholders of school governing of different focus groups at schools in two provinces of South Africa. The study explored the actual or theoretical involvement of learners in School Governing Bodies (SGBs); what barriers exist to learner participation; the key issue of training for learner involvement and whether SGBs have contributed to the development of democracy in South African schools. The findings suggest that despite being afforded a full role in school governance by post-apartheid educational policy, learners do not always play their part in school decision-making. While learner participation in SGBs in South Africa offers considerable potential for both school improvement and making a contribution to the deepening and consolidation of democracy in South Africa, there is much work still to be done.

INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND

In recent years a strong argument has been made for democracy as development in itself (Sen 1999; Walker and Unterhalter 2007) as well as providing a better context of other forms of social and economic development (UNDP 2000; Harber 2002; UNDP 2005). Moreover, education has for a long time been assumed to have the potential to play a part in fostering more democratic states and societies (Carr and Hartnett 1996; Callan 1997). While empirical studies vary in the extent to which they support this relationship between education and democratization (Lipset 1959; Benavot 1996; McMahon 1999; Castello-Climent 2008), a key argument is that it is not necessarily formal education per se that might foster more democratic values and behaviours but that what matters is the nature, structures and process of the education experienced (Harber 2009).

In terms of debates about the structures and processes of education for democracy, it is increasingly argued that learners should play a role in more democratic forms of distributed leadership, decision-making and policy implementation, as they constitute a major stakeholder group (Woods 2005; Cockburn 2006). There is now considerable amount of international and comparative literature on democratic involvement of learners in matters affecting their education which includes the many arguments supporting it. In this literature there is evidence that strongly suggests that listening to pupils, encouraging their participation and giving them

more power and responsibility (that is, greater democratisation) can enhance school effectiveness and facilitate school improvement as well as contribute to the development of more democratic values (Mncube and Harber 2010). Mechanisms to involve learners specifically in the governance of schools have been employed in some contexts as a form improving decision-making and democratising education (Beane and Apple 1999; Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000; Mncube and Harber 2010) as well as in recognition of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989:

'State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all actions affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child'.

Cockburn (2006) found that the learners' voice is effective when they attend the proposed meetings, but is more effective when learners actively take part in shaping the agenda of those meetings. 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 given a chance to make an effective contribution in meetings (Mncube 2008). In terms of the functioning of the school governing bodies, learners should not only be there for window-dressing or used in a tokenistic way but they must take an active part in such meetings.

However, there are few empirical studies of how more democratic forms of school governance, particularly the role of learners, are perceived and operationalized by key participants. This article is therefore concerned with both the use of school governance structures to help to promote democracy and more specifically with the role of learners in school governance. It focuses on South Africa where educational policy has explicitly promoted the use of school governing bodies and the involvement of learners as an instrument of democratization.

South Africa

In regards to South Africa, in 1996 the newly democratic state of South Africa published a White Paper on organisation governance and funding of schools (Republic of South Africa 1996), from which emanated the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (SASA). The SASA became operative at the beginning of 1997 and mandated that all public state schools in South Africa must have democratically elected school governing bodies (SGBs) composed of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and learners (in secondary schools). Parents are supposed to be the majority in the SGBs and the chair of the governing should come from the parent component.

The SASA is regarded as a tool aimed at, *inter alia*, redressing past exclusions and facilitating the necessary transformation to support the ideals of representation and participation in the schools and the country (Karlsen 1999). By the establishment of the SASA the state aimed at fostering democratic school governance and thereby introducing a school governance structure that involves all the stakeholder groups of education, in active and responsible roles in order to promote issues of democracy: tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (Department of Education 1996:16).

The functions of the school governing bodies, of which the learners are part, are clearly stated in the South African Schools Act 1996. Functions include, among others, recommending the appointment of educators and non-educator staff, deciding on the language policy of the school, control and maintenance of the school property, and determining school fees. As members of the school governing bodies, learner representatives are also required to take

part actively in the execution of these functions, which in most cases has not necessarily been the case.

The SASA mandates that secondary school learners, who are members of the Representative Council for Learners (RCL), should be part of school governance through participation in school governing bodies. Participation by the learners in governance processes was intended to provide the necessary space for them to acquire democratic capacity and leadership skills (see DOE 1996). The Department of Education (1999) provides the Guides for Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) and outlines the following main functions of RCLs:

- a) An RCL acts as an important instrument for liaison and communication.
- b) An RCL meets at regular intervals, as determined by its constitution, to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and complaints from its constituency.
- c) After every meeting a RCL gives feedback to the learners.

Other main functions include drafting a constitution of the RCL and submitting it to the SGB for approval; acting as representatives of their fellow learners in SGBs and assisting in maintaining order in the school in accordance with the approved school rules. Further, they should set a positive example of discipline, loyalty, respect, punctuality, academic thoroughness, morality, cooperation and active participation in school activities; promote good relations among learners themselves, between learners and staff, the school and the community and the school and parents; Finally, they have a duty to promote responsibility, and leadership; support the educational programme of the school; and must maintain and refine the traditions of the school.

However, Mncube (2008) contends that the inclusion of learners in SGBs is also fraught with difficulties and contestations. He maintains that in terms of the SASA, learner governors should be regarded as full and legitimate members of the SGBs; but they are often not afforded full opportunity to participate in crucial decisions by the adult members of governing bodies, directly or indirectly. The implications of the findings of the latter study suggested that spaces should be created for learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs in order to allow them to exercise their right to participation, thus en-

gaging fruitfully in deliberations and dialogue dealing with school governance. Silencing the voice of learners, it was argued, implicitly or explicitly means that issues of democracy and social justice are ignored (Mncube 2008).

Very often principals in South African schools manipulate the SGB to function in a way that suits them (Joorst 2007). As such, learner participation in SGBs is determined by what teachers and principals view as appropriate. This compromised learner involvement is criticized by many writers (Mncube 2001, 2008; Joorst 2007; Young 2000). Young (2000: 6) takes this further and warns that the challenge for inclusion requires deeper conditions than "nominal voting rights", attending to issues such as modes of communicating and social difference. Mncube et al. (2011) cite Young (2000), who contend that democratic norms mandate inclusion as a criterion of political legitimacy. They state that democracy implies that all members of an organisation are included equally in the decision-making process, so that any decisions that are made should be considered by all as legitimate (Mncube et al. 2011). Young speaks of two types of inclusion, namely external exclusion, in terms of which some individuals are kept out of the debates or decision-making processes, whereas internal exclusion refers to the exclusion of those who are normally included in the group; but dismissed in the form their interaction privileges, language issues, and/or participation as irrelevant (Mncube et al. 2011; Mncube 2007; Young 2000).

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODS

The study reported here is qualitative in nature and explores the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in a school in relation to SGBs.

The qualitative data in the current study was generated by means of the use of focus group interviews. Group interviews capitalised on the communication between research participants in order to generate data, with the researcher relying on in-group interactions and discussions for the generation of rich data. The rationale for the researchers' use of focus group interviews was congruent with the contention that the use of this method can facilitate access to people's knowledge and experiences, and can be used to examine not only what people think, but also

how and why they think in a certain way. The researchers ensured that the number of participants in the groups surveyed fell within the standard range of focus groups, comprising between four to eight research participants.

Four secondary schools were selected from both the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal so that, in all, eight schools were involved. The schools were purposively selected to provide a range of remote rural, rural, township and urban schools in each province, so that views could be obtained from those who had a role to play in schools that varied markedly in terms of their physical condition, facilities, available space, access to social amenities, and local community infrastructure and poverty levels. The context within which a school is located in South African education is an important factor.

The sample comprised the principal and three focus groups drawn from each school. The focus groups in each school consisted of between four and six parents, between four and six learners, and between four and six educators. Of the sample, two parents, two learners and two educators had to be currently serving on the SGB. Two observations per SGB were conducted in each school.

The Involvement of Learners in School Governing Bodies

The focus groups were asked if school governing bodies (SGBs) have been able to effectively utilize learners in the SGBs. The following are some of the responses that were elicited from respondents. On the whole, respondents suggested that involvement of learners in SGBs is working since in some schools learners take part in crucial decisions like the appointment of teachers. Their participation however, depended on the nature of training they had acquired when they were introduced into the SGBs. A focus group from the Western Cape said,

I would say yes. Depending on how those learners have been empowered. For us for instance we have been very lucky to always have very sharp learners from the SRC who end up in the SGB. Especially when it comes to an appointment of an educators because remember they are the recipients at the end of the day. Whoever we interview here has to deal with the learners at the end of the day so we always want

to hear their voice. During interviews learners would be asking questions like everybody else. They are part of the interview panels.... We want them to say how they feel about each of these candidates and also make a contribution in the final decision – they even take part in the final nomination as well. We always want them to have a say. Because at the end of the day they will live with whatever choice we have made. (Western Cape SGB 1)

The above focus group indicated that during teacher appointment interviews learners also ask questions like everybody else does. They contend that the prospective educators should see from the very interviews that such are the kinds of learners they will be dealing with in the classroom.

Participants from this focus group also believe that the involvement of learners can contribute to the delivery of quality education. One of them said,

Active involvement of learners has always ensured that quality educators reach the classroom at the end of the day. (Western Cape SGB 1)

The findings suggest that in some schools learners do participate actively in the school governing bodies, but this depends on the opportunities to do so and the training that has been offered to them—how empowered have they been. Some schools, for example, attract very able learners from their RCLs who end up becoming members of the SGB. In a school in Cape Town it was suggested that learners are particularly active when it comes to appointment of educators because they will be the recipients of what these educators will have to offer to the school. So, in this school learners' voice is always important when it comes to appointment of educators. During interviews learners ask questions like everybody else, and they take part in the final decision of who gets appointed. The school has come to realise that the active involvement of learners helps to ensure that quality educators get appointed to the jobs. This corroborates what Cockburn (2006) refers to as engagement — whereby learners not only attend, but are given a chance to make an effective contribution in meetings (cited in Mncube 2008).

In addition, learners at some schools take part in the important finance committees of the SGBs. One member of a school governing body in the Western Cape said,

We also for instance in our finance committee we always want to put one learner as part of the finance committee because transparency in the school is a concern for me. If the student knows where the money comes from and where the money goes, the school will never have any problem with the learners as far as monies are concerned. In our school before we table the budget to the learners of the governing body; the treasurer and myself will sit down and do the draft; we'll take it to the educators to have an input then we will go to the RCL and say this is the budget for the school for next year and remember their budget is also included in the school's budget - they've got their portion there. So when you go to the SGB these two learners they already know exactly what is in the budget and when you go to the learners they always assist us in explaining each and every item on the budget - they know what this money is for and where it will be coming from and they will explain to the learners also we have got this amount that is budgeted for each item when learners are looking for this they are the first one to say but this is not budgeted for. We might need to go and negotiate this one with the SGB because it is not part of the budget. So they know exactly how the budget process unfolds. In that way learners won't make unnecessary demands because they are actively involved in the processes of budgeting (Western Cape SGB 1)

However, in other focus groups, and reflecting the concerns discussed in the literature review above (Joorst 2007; Young 2000; Mncube 2008) it was suggested that some SGBs exercise internal exclusions, not fully involving even those parents and learners who are also members of the body. For example, a KwaZulu-Natal-based principal contended,

In many instances, principals will chair. The SGB chairperson is only there for issues of formality; otherwise, the principal will act as the one who is running the SGB. Members should be actively involved through the establishment of the subcommittees of the SGBs. Where some of them get an opportunity to chair the meetings of these subcommittees, they feel involved (Principal of Hluhluwe SGB 2)

According to me as far as SGBs are concerned, I would say SGBs are formed by parents, teachers as well as the learners, only to find that the school where I am, the most suggestions or opinions made in SGB meetings are

been made by the principal of the school. No suggestions come from parents and learners, although they are part and parcel of the SGB. But most of the suggestions are made by the principal. Even though learners might have information pertaining to issues; but it is only the principal who has the final say. However the principal consider our ideas but it depends on how strong the idea is....Principal is the decision-maker parents and learners are not given a voice. Depending on the strength of the idea, the principal may consider it but in most cases the final say is from him (KZN focus group 2).

The above contention is in line with Brown and Duku (2008) and Mncube (2007) who contend that SGBs are fraught with social tension, rejection, domination, psychological stress and power struggles. One of the functions of the SGBs is to recommend the appointment of educators, but in one of the focus groups in KZN, it was found that in reality it is the school principal who appoints educators in the school. One of educators said,

The South African Schools Act says that the teacher can be appointed by the SGB, here at school the teacher is just appointed by the principal.... he just picks up a phone and phones the teacher to come to school without consulting any other member of the SGB. (Educator of KZN focus group 2)

In another focus group in KwaZulu-Natal a further educator said,

If it has to do with interviews [of the appointment of educators] learners can't be part... it's beyond them, I mean they can't cope. Yah they can't cope, generally, yah.... they can't come up with something. (Educator of KZN focus group 1)

Thus, while a section of the SASA states that SGBs are endowed with a role of recommending the appointment of teachers, amongst other things, the above quotations suggest that in some cases this task is in reality more a responsibility of the principal. However, it is also worth noting that the context in which the schools operate matters. Learner involvement varies from school to school and also from province to province. For example, learners in the Western Cape were found to be taking part even in finance committees, which was not the case with most schools (which tended to be in more rural areas), in the sample from KwaZulu-Natal.

Culture and Status as Barriers to Learner Participation

As discussed above, the benefits of learner involvement do not apply across all schools. In some schools, learners' voice is not as respected as in some. There is increasing recognition of the importance of culture in the operation of education (Stephens 2007) and culture can play a negative role in learner participation in SGBs. In one of the author's experience and opinion, black children in South Africa have often been socialised in such a way that they do not communicate or deliberate effectively with the adults, which has been construed as respect – the more quieter a child is in front of the adult, the most respectful he/she is.

One chair of governors said,

Learners need to be part of school governing body because they need to learn from the beginning how meetings ought to be run. Their participation is not always as vocal as one would have wanted to, simply because...learners find it very difficult in talking in the midst of adults....Learners do not have the time to sacrifice to be at meetings...as such they get left out along the way. I feel that somewhere along the line they need to be there but their contribution is often questioned.....as to whether it is relevant. (Chair of governors from a Western Cape SGB 2)

The above quotation is from a school dominated by Afrikaans speaking 'coloureds' but the findings are similar to the one from a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal where learners were not free in presenting their views in the midst of the adults, but request teachers to speak on their behalf in SGB meetings. When asked what the cause of this fear was, some educators believed that this fear is exacerbated by the use of traditional teaching methods. The use of the traditional teaching methods may account for the reluctance of learners in participating in SGBs – teachers and learners have been socialised in a "banking concept" of learning (Freire 1970) in ways that a teacher (adult) is the only one who is supposed to do the talking, pouring the learning content to learners and that their job is just to listen to the teacher. It may be for this reason that some learner representatives on SGBs will ask the teachers to present their points; which should have been presented by them. As one learner in a focus group put it,

No... ma'am you should say this for me. (KZN focus group 1)

The same focus group of teachers elaborated on this point and said,

The real issue here or the cause is the culture – the African culture says when adult people are meeting on a particular issue, there shouldn't be children sitting around there. When the children are invited to the meetings with the adults in the governing body where there are teachers and learners, you know they do respect their parents and they know very well what their culture says -they have to respect their teachers and parents – as such it is very hard for them even to say something and they are very shy to say anything because they will feel as though they are insulting the adults if they tell them how they feel about such matters....the policy [on learner participation in SGBs] may say something, and it it's a good thing but our culture does not make it easy for them to easily air their views- there is no one amongst the SGB members who says to them you shouldn't say anything – but it becomes automatic that they become silence in the midst of adults (Educator from a KZN focus group 1).

Socio-economic status was also found to be a factor preventing learners from effective participation in the SGBs. Learners whose parents have not paid school fees were found to be less active and afraid to take part in deliberations of the SGBs, particularly during the meetings of the finance committees. As one principal in a school governing body in the Western Cape put it,

Now I will say something from my point of view. Let's take example of issues in finance committee where the discussion is about the learners who did not pay school fees and the ways that could be used to get school funds from those parents - now the learners in the SGB are immediately intimidated because either his parent didn't pay or the majority of his class didn't pay. Or he knows the inside story as to why they didn't want to pay, the learner is on the ground he or she knows more than you. Now that learner is going to be very silent if he knows that his parents didn't pay. And the thing is how you encourage that learner in discussion... so much more time is spent in trying to get the opinion of what the learner feels about (Principal from Western Cape SGB 2).

Training for Effective Learner Involvement on School Governing Bodies

The issue of the lack of training came up throughout the interviews as a hindrance to learner participation,

... Involvement of learners is not working but ...we shouldn't exclude them. I still feel the need to include them because there are issues that affect learners I think what they need is just a training on how to participate when there are meetings. I think there is a lack of skill on how to participate when you are involved with adult people in a meeting where you are equal partners.... (Teacher, KZN focus group 1).

As training of SGBs emerged as a key point from the interviews, the current section will consider such training as a way of improving effective learner involvement in SGBs. Davies et al. (2002), Trafford (2003), Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) have all also noted the importance of preparatory training in the successful implementation of more democratic forms of school organisation and governance. Welgemoed (1998) identified the training of learners as key to the successful implementation of democratic structures in a school in South Africa. Focus groups were asked if learners were sufficiently trained to be part of SGBs, and the respondents came up with different opinions in this regard. In general, learners who are in the SGBs were found to have been trained to some extent, but insufficiently, and much more was required to be done. On joining the SGB, the members of SGBs were provided with one-off training, which was perceived as relatively unhelpful. The present findings suggest that SGBs of which learners are a part should be provided with such training on an on-going basis. They should also be encouraged to attend as many workshops as possible, on such issues as financial management, short-listing for interviews and education laws among other issues. In this way, they could develop skills which they could also use when they have left the school and could also pass on to new potential learner members of SGBs. A Principal from an SGB in KwaZulu-Natal argued,

The training that learners get from the Department is a once-off. Once learners are elected on the SGBs, they are given the once-off training and they never get any ongoing training; we need to develop our learners on

an ongoing basis, because they need to know what is in it for them also. (KZN SGB 2)

The South African Department of Education (1997) in fact contends that capacity-building is a major requirement for South African SGBs. In addition, Ngidi (2004) maintains that providing training programmes for the members of SGBs could play an important role in the operation of such bodies, by improving their awareness regarding curriculum-related activities. In addition, Tsotetsi et al. (2008) indicate that there is a need for training of the participants in SGBs in order to enable such bodies to function efficiently. Training might help to circumvent the problem caused by the conflict of roles between school governors and school management teams which several authors describe (Heystek 2004; Mncube 2005).

School Governing Bodies in Promoting Democracy

There is international evidence that experience of democratic structures and processes in schools can help schools to be more effective and to develop more democratic young people (Harber and Mncube 2010). The respondents were asked whether SGBs contribute to developing democracy in South African schools. The general opinion was found to be that they do, but not to the fullest extent possible, due to the lack of training or induction into the role which SGB members need to play, so that such bodies are unable to function effectively. The potential role of SGBs in promoting democracy is well captured in the following statement by one of the principals participating in the current study:

SGBs are by its [i.e., their] own right democratic institutions “ there is representation of all stakeholders – learners, learners, teaching and non-teaching staff...all the stakeholders have a voice in terms of governance of the school. (Western Cape SGB 2)

While a principal in another focus group said,

I would say again it depends from school to schools. The very composition of the school governing body should be rendering democracy in the school because all stakeholders are represented... there are teacher representatives, non-teaching staff representatives, learners representatives and learner representatives.....the composition is such that there are always more

learners than any other stakeholders combined, which to me is true democracy at its best. But again if learners are illiterate what does democracy really mean to them? What does democracy really mean to them because the very few teachers that are in the governing body because they've got the know-how they can easily influence and manipulate the processes... I would say in schools where all the stakeholders have got the interest of the school at heart, democracy is practiced and governing bodies do allow a situation where democracy can actually thrive in schools. (Principal, Western Cape SGB 1)

Some focus groups noted that SGBs are supposed to be democratic, but in most cases democracy does not exist in practice, for example one teacher from another focus group indicated,

In our school there is no democracy in terms of the SGB formation – stakeholders are not given a chance to air their views – but all decisions are taken by the leader and I find this to be a problem. In my view, I think SGB need to be developed so that members of SGBs work in very democratic way... and you can be happy if you see that your views are taken into consideration. It is depressing to see that decisions are taken by only one person- our SGB is very poor when it comes to democracy (KZN focus group 3)

The above school is a school in rural context. However, it was interesting to note that even schools in similar contexts will have differing views in terms of operation of SGBs. For example another teacher a focus group from a rural setting said,

The SGB does contribute to developing democracy, for example, learners in most schools take part in functioning of the school - They exercise their democratic right to air their views about what they would like or about the obstacles that are there. (KZN focus group 1)

CONCLUSION

The investigation considered the views of various stakeholders of school governing of different focus groups at schools in two provinces of South Africa. The study explored the actual or theoretical involvement of learners in SGBs; what barriers exist to learner participation; the key issue of training for learner involvement and whether SGBs have contributed to the develop-

ment of democracy in South African schools. The study found that the involvement of learners in SGBs help spread democratic practices in the school and in wider South African society. Further, findings suggest that when given opportunity learner governors play an important role of being a voice of the learners. Findings suggest that it becomes easier for learners to communicate their concerns through their peers. Learner participation in SGBs in South Africa offers considerable potential for both school improvement and making a contribution to the deepening and consolidation of democracy in South Africa. However, it is still difficult for some learner governors to regard themselves as legitimate members of the SGB - most of them still refer to 'us' (learners) and 'they' (adult members) when deliberating about the functioning of school governing bodies.

Power relations also play a significant role in relation to gender issues. Female learner governors tended to be less vocal than male governors. Silencing the voice of learners implicitly or explicitly would mean that the issues of social justice and democracy are not taken into consideration in SGBs. As I have noted before, while representation and debate are theoretically open and fair, structural and behavioural factors still inhibit the extent to which SGBs operate. Overall, the authoritarianism of school management and governance characteristic of the apartheid era have disappeared, yet issues concerning the values and skills necessary for full democratic participation remain. Cultural barriers were found to be one of the main hindrances of learner participation in SGBs

RECOMMENDATIONS

Spaces should be created for learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs. This would allow them to exercise their right to participation thus engaging themselves fruitfully on deliberations dealing with school governance. In this way social justice would prevail and there would be a great potential for their voice to be heard and they would feel the sense of belonging hence engage fruitfully in dialogues. There is also a need of educating learners about both the Western and African culture – lack of learner participation pointed to cultural diversity. The education on culture will however, mean more, and perhaps more challenging, education and train-

ing for all participants, with such added impetus going beyond the technicalities of SGBs to critically examine culture, identities, roles and power relationships as well.

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