

## Student Participation in School Governance: The Views of Rural School Principals

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this paper is to explore the views of rural school principals on student participation in school governance in South Africa. An argument is presented that although student leadership is taken as a *fait accompli* in many schools, the reality is that in rural schools, this still remains a wishful thinking. Apart from a literature review on student participation in school governance, the paper reports on a study in which empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from rural school principals. The literature findings revealed that student participation in school governance is a critical component of education in South Africa. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for the student leaders to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance activities.

### INTRODUCTION

In recent years there has been a strong argument about the entrenching of democracy in schools by the inclusion of students in school governance activities (Blackbourn 2015; McGrath 2015; Wiseman and Popov 2015). Revolutionary changes are occurring in the structure of education governance in schools, and some of the most significant changes are related to the role of students in school governance. Malani and Reif (2015) confirm that in a number of countries, youth exclusion in school governance is evident, often crossing with other forms of marginalisation linking to the socio-economic status and location of the schools. In most instances rural schools are the victims of such exclusions.

Duma (2015) states that in South Africa, the new democratic government in 1996 passed the South African Schools Act (SASA) which mandated all public schools in the country to have democratically elected school governing bodies (SGBs) composed of teachers, parents and students (in secondary schools). Harber and Mncube (2015) posit that by the establishment of the SASA, the state aimed at fostering democratic school governance and thereby introducing school governance structures that involve teachers, students and parents. The student representatives in school governing bodies pro-

vide the students with a legitimate voice in school governance (Duma 2015).

Chingos and Peterson (2015) maintain that school decentralisation framework offers opportunities for a new type of school governance which favours partnership governance mode that empowers teachers and students over hierarchical patterns of bureaucratic control and management of the schools. Student leaders as members of the SGBs are legitimate governors in schools. Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) and Mncube et al. (2015) concur that these students have to carry out SGB functions such as assisting in maintaining order in schools, setting positive example of discipline, promoting good relations between students and teachers, promoting responsibility and leadership and supporting the education programmes of the school.

However, Mncube (2012) contends that the inclusion of students in SGBs is fraught with difficulties and contestations. He maintains that student governors are not afforded fully opportunity to participate in crucial decision in school governance matters. They are side-lined.

Duma (2015) asserts that the absence of student experience from school governance brings about the systematic silencing of the student's voice. The current trend in the international community recognises the right of the child to access education, and also requires the right of the student to participate in decision-making

(Carr 2005; Blackbourn 2015; De Lissoy et al. 2015). Schools need to maintain the integrity of shared governance and give students a voice on campus. Duflo et al. (2015) attest that the inclusion of students in the governance of schools is a practical way to promote democratic values and develop democratic school governance.

Consequently, the aim of the paper is to probe the views held by rural school principals on student participation in school governance, problems encountered by rural school principals when attempting to involve student leaders in school governance and the suggestions the rural school principals have on encouraging the effective student participation in school governance.

### **Objectives of the Study**

There is now a considerable amount of international and comparative literature on democratic involvement of students in matters affecting their education, which includes many arguments supporting it (Abdalla 2014; Ayers et al. 2015; Brasof 2015; McGrath 2015). Blackbourn (2015) avers that it is critical for students to speak up for school projects and programs they think are important. Duma (2015) concurs with this assertion as he states that students are key stakeholders in the public education system as they can provide perspective not offered by other stakeholders.

Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools Harber and Mncube (2015) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only as one experience them. Therefore schools need to perform what they seek to endorse. Brasof (2015) endorses this assertion by stating that democratic schools and democracy itself do not grow by chance, but they result from explicit attempts by teachers, and thus schools, have to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. Therefore, a democratic school is one that allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberations dealing with the school governance, where they are prepared to live in democracy through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. In terms of this paper, these skills, values, and behaviours are obtained through active democratic involvement of students in school governance (Grubb and Tredway 2015).

A cross-section of the field of student engagement in education reveals that very little research has been conducted on the views of rural school principals on student participation in school governance in South Africa. The understanding of these perceptions is instrumental in ordering the rights and the duties of students as one of the stakeholders involved in school governance (Mncube et al. 2015). The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research had to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches on this issue.

The researcher, having worked in the rural schools as a teacher and a principal, perceives that the process of involving students in the governance of rural schools is difficult to manage because in most rural schools students and principals often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play (Duma 2015). Compounding these uncertainties are the perceptions that principals and student leaders often have about the roles that the other should play. Some principals feel that too much student involvement in school governance violates their sense of professionalism. They are reluctant to work with students and they regard them as intruding and troublesome, they are resistant to collaborate with students because they have become accustomed to functioning without student leaders being central to their work and they feel that they have enough mounting professional strain without the additional pressures of entering into partnership with students. The perceptions highlighted warrant an exploration of the views of rural school principals on student participation in school governance.

### **METHODOLOGY**

To address the research problem, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative research design were undertaken.

#### **Literature Review**

The researcher consulted literature which is relevant to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

#### **Quantitative Research Paradigm**

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study. The

research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents (size of the sample and sampling procedures), the research instruments, namely the questionnaires, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

### Population and Sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select twenty five rural school principals in each circuit of Sisonke and UMgungundlovu Districts as respondents. Since these two districts have eight circuits, two hundred rural school principals were selected as respondents. This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature, and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Kumar 2014). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

### Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as research instrument. As Kumar (2014) maintains that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent sufficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analysed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained in other methods.

### Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 dealt with the biographic and general information. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the rural school principals' views on student participation in school governance. The respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*. Section 3 also had closed questions, focusing on the rural school principals' analysis of the role

of students in the governance of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes*, *Unsure*, *No*. Section 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein rural school principals had to mention problems they encounter when attempting to engage students in school governance and had to suggest what could be done to improve effective student participation in school governance.

### Administration of the Questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in five rural schools. These schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability, consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires. In the main study, two hundred rural school principals were randomly selected and were requested to complete their questionnaires.

The first sample population responses were 120 (60%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 16 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total responses of 136 (68%) respondents. That represented a satisfying response.

### Data Processing

After all the questionnaires had been received, the important task was then to reduce the mass of data obtained to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were coded and frequency distributions were generated.

## RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

### General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents

When the item of rural school principals' qualification was analysed, it was realised that all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

Table 1 indicated that a high proportion of school principals (65%) had good academic qualifications. This shows that the education level of the principals in rural schools is improving.

Success in the execution of the principals' duties including student management is determined by the extent to which they are educated. This high qualification rate can help principals to empower student leaders with student management skills (Duma and Khuzwayo 2015).

**Table 1: Respondents' academic qualifications**

<i>Education qualification</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Below Matric (Grade 12)	0	0
Matric (Grade 12)	0	0
Matric + 1 ( M+1)	18	13
Matric +2 (M+2)	30	22
Matric+3 and above	88	65
Total	136	100

### **Rural School Principals' Views on Student Participation in School Governance**

In Table 2 respondents were required to indicate their views on student participation in school governance. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*.

#### ***Secondary Schools are not Compelled to Have Elected Student Leaders in School Governance***

Table 2 revealed that more than half of the respondents (61%) indicated that they do not agree with the statement that secondary schools are not compelled to have elected student leaders in school governance. This high percentage

is disturbing because in terms of the SASA, a representative council of learners at school must be established at every public school enrolling students in grade eight and higher. This is confirmed by Harber and Mncube (2015) as they assert that the SASA mandated all secondary schools in South Africa should have the Representative Councils for Learners (RCLs). These learners should be part of school governance through participation in SGBs. Mncube et al. (2015) also confirm that RCLs act as important instruments for liaison and communication and assist in maintaining order and discipline in schools.

#### ***Secondary Schools Can Have the Prefect System if They Wish So***

As shown in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (70%) agreed that secondary schools can have the prefect system if they wish so. In terms of the Education Amendment Act (Act No. 57 of 2001), article 11.1 of SASA has been amended, and the Representative Council of Learners is now the only recognised and legal representative body for students at schools (Western Cape DoE 2003). Mncube (2009) states that the intention of the amendment was to make schools aware that by persisting with the old prefect system they were breaking the law. The amendment reinforced the role to be played by the Representative Council of Students by strengthening the legal side to its implementation.

**Table 2: Rural school principals' views on student participation in school governance**

<i>Items</i>		<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Secondary schools are not compelled to have elected student leaders in school governance	N	28	25	27	56	136
	%	21	18	20	41	100
Secondary schools can have the prefect system if they wish so	N	41	54	27	14	136
	%	30	40	20	10	100
Secondary schools can have both the prefects and elected student leaders	N	26	54	56	0	136
	%	19	40	41	0	100
Principals must be allowed to nominate student leaders	N	20	61	41	14	136
	%	15	45	30	10	100
The student leaders interfere with school administration if they assume some of the responsibility of planning and executing the activities of schools	N	54	63	14	5	136
	%	40	46	10	4	100

### ***Secondary Schools Can Have Both the Prefects and Elected Student Leaders***

Table 2 also revealed that more than half of the respondents (59%) agreed that secondary schools can have both prefects and elected student leaders in school governance. As indicated in the above paragraph, the Act stipulates that only elected student leaders representing all students in secondary schools, are legally allowed to serve in school governance structures and any other body is illegal. Therefore, prefects are illegal in schools. These findings confirm the assertion that the process of involving students in school governance is difficult to manage because in most schools students and principals often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play (Duma 2015; Harber and Mncube 2015).

### ***Principals Must be Allowed to Nominate Student Leaders***

Table 2 further on revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that they agreed that principals must be allowed to nominate student leaders. This is against the dictates of the SASA and the stipulations of the Provincial Gazette Extraordinary (5946), dated 31 January 2003 which both asseverate that student leaders must be elected by students (South Africa 2003). These findings confirm uncertainties and perceptions that principals and student leaders often have about the roles that the other should play. Mncube et al. (2015) attest that some principals feel that too much student involvement in school governance violates their sense of professionalism and they are reluctant to work with students whom they regard as intruding and troublesome. Such principals would feel comfortable to nominate their own student leaders.

### ***The Student Leaders Interfere with School Administration if they Assume Some of the Responsibility of Planning and Executing the Activities of Schools***

In conclusion, Table 2 indicated that a high proportion of the respondents (86%) agreed that student leaders interfere with school administration if they assume some school government activities. The strong support for this item indicates that principals do not know the role of the student leaders in schools, which is linked to the day-to-day running of the school, and student leaders are given the opportunity and authority to exercise leadership skills in selected areas of management such as supervision, discipline, and organising of activities (Carr 2005; Duma 2015). These findings indicate that some principals are resistant to collaborate with student leaders because they have become accustomed to functioning without student leaders being central to their work (Grubb and Tredway 2015).

### ***Rural School Principals' Analysis of the Role of Student Leaders in the Governance of their Schools***

In Table 3, rural school principals were required to analyse the role of student leaders in the governance of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes, Unsure and No*.

#### ***Student leaders are not Always Consulted, When Student Issues are Discussed***

Table 3 revealed that more than half of the respondents (87%) indicated that in their schools student leaders were not always consulted, when student issues are discussed. This implies that

**Table 3: Rural school principals' analysis of the role of student leaders in the governance of their schools**

<i>Items</i>		<i>Yes</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Student leaders are not always consulted, when student issues are discussed.	N	118	4	14	136
	%	87	3	10	100
Student leaders regularly interact with the principal.	N	46	5	85	136
	%	34	4	62	100
Student leaders interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on	N	118	18	0	136
	%	87	13	0	100
Student leaders work with the principal to promote a culture of learning in school.	N	27	0	109	136
	%	20	0	80	100
Student leaders support the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties	N	27	0	109	136
	%	20	0	80	100



most schools are not following the dictates of the Department of Education that stipulate that students should have a part in the determination of activities which so deeply affect their lives (South Africa 1996). Participation of students in school governance, as required by the SASA is based on the concept that students as members of the school community have a right to participate in decision-making processes (Harber and Mncube 2015). SASA provides students with input into decision making in public schools. Research on promoting student involvement in decision making indicates that student engagement supports youth autonomy and other characteristic of self-determination, which have positive outcomes for students' academic performance (Ayer et al. 2015; Daft 2015; Tricker 2015).

#### ***Student Leaders Regularly Interact with the Principal***

Table 3 revealed that 62 percent of the respondents indicated that student leaders do not regularly interact with the principal. This implies that most schools do not really use student leaders to promote democratic participation. This confirms the assertion by Duflo et al. (2015) that some schools are still autocratic and they reinforce passive subordination amongst the students. The RCL policy maintains that student leaders act as important instruments for liaison and communication and they must meet at fairly regular intervals, with principals and other school stakeholders to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and even complaints from its constituencies (Mncube 2012).

#### ***Student Leaders Interfere in Issues that They Do Not Have Any Knowledge on***

Table 3 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (87%) indicated that student leaders interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on. Mncube et al. (2015) aver that student leaders play a pivotal role in democratising the education landscape. They represent the voice of the students. They provide space for students to articulate their needs, concerns, aspirations as well as present their wishes to school management. Harber and Mncube (2015) declare that very often principals in South African schools use the SGB to function in a way that suits them. As such, student par-

ticipation in SGB is determined by what principals view as appropriate.

#### ***Student Leaders Work with Principals to Promote a Culture of Learning in Their Schools***

Table 3 indicated that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that the student leaders in their schools, do not work with principals to promote a culture of learning, despite the fact that the Department of Education contends that students are an indispensable component of democratic school governance at the secondary school level, and that they have earned the right to participate in the promotion of the culture of learning in schools (Harber and Mncube 2015). Duflo et al. (2015) maintain that student leaders have a duty to promote education programmes of the school and must maintain and refine the traditions of the school.

#### ***Student Leaders Support the Principal, Educators and Non-teaching Staff in the Performance of Their Duties***

In conclusion, Table 3 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that student leaders in their schools do not support the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties. The main objective of establishing student leadership structures is to create a sense of co-responsibility. It is also an attempt to create a sound and healthy relationship between students, teachers and non-teaching staff, as well as parents. It fosters sound interaction among students and teachers (Brasof 2015).

## **DISCUSSION**

The study revealed that the process of involving students in the governance of rural schools is difficult to manage because in most rural schools students and principals often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play (Addi-Raccah and Ainhoren 2009; Duma 2015; Harber and Mncube 2015). The study revealed uncertainties and perceptions that principals and student leaders often have about the roles that the other should play. Some principals feel that too much student involvement in school governance violates their

sense of professionalism. McGrath (2015) attests that some principals are reluctant to work with students and they regard them as intruding and troublesome. This also confirmed by Mncube et al. (2015) as they state that these principals are resistant to collaborate with students because they have become accustomed to functioning without student leaders being central to their work.

Since this paper intended to explore the views of rural school principals on student participation in school governance in South Africa, in conclusion, respondents had to cite problems they encounter in engaging student leaders in their schools and these problems are summed up as the following:

- ♦ Student leaders lack understanding of their role in school governance activities,
- ♦ Student leaders have no expertise in school governance,
- ♦ Training is not provided for student leaders,
- ♦ Some student leaders are rude and troublesome,
- ♦ Student leaders attend school governance meetings irregularly,
- ♦ Student leaders are afraid to speak their minds in meetings.

### CONCLUSION

This study explored the views held by rural school principals on student participation in school governance. The study revealed that rural school principals had a qualified support of the role of student leaders in the governance of their schools, as they maintain that level of student involvement in school governance should be limited and prescribed. Their main premise is that there are certain aspects of school governance where the involvement of student leaders would be undesirable; such as those involving employment and discipline of teachers. The study also revealed that the establishment of the Representative Council of Learners broke a new ground for student participation in student leadership.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ Schools should build the necessary frameworks and communication avenues for developing student leadership,

- ♦ Principals need to know more about student leadership and its contribution to schools,
- ♦ Principals need to modify their attitudes towards student leaders and learn how to work effectively with them,
- ♦ Principals need to participate in special programmes focused on student leadership,
- ♦ Student leaders' role in schools should be redesigned to lead to better collaboration with teachers.

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