

Implicit Leadership in Rural School Management in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to explore the views of teachers on the role of learners in rural school management in South Africa. Apart from a literature review on learner management, empirical study investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from teachers about the role of learners in rural school management. The literature findings revealed that learner participation in school management is a critical component of education in South Africa. The study further on revealed that empirical findings highlighted the important functions of learner leadership. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for rural schools to build the necessary frameworks and communication avenues for developing learner leaders.

INTRODUCTION

Despite the powers that learners are endowed with regarding the management of schools in South Africa, they are not yet given sufficient space to deliberate on issues of school management; instead they are still excluded by some teaching staff from taking part in crucial decisions on school management issues (Mncube et al. 2015). Duma (2015) states that after 1994, the South African government introduced several education policies and legislations to democratise school management. The most important Act was passed in 1996, known as the South African Schools Act (SASA) (South Africa 1996; Mabena 2002). Harber and Mncube (2015) assert that through the SASA, democratic school management structures were established in all public schools. According to Mncube et al. (2015), this democratisation included the idea that learners need to participate in school management activities. Duma (2015) mentions that the SASA obliges all public schools to establish school governing bodies (SGBs) which must consist of parents, teachers and learners. In addition, the SASA mandates all secondary schools to establish Representative Councils for Learners (RCLs), elected by learners (Province of Western Cape 2003; South Africa 2003).

Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) posit that it is not easy to dispute the benefits that learner leadership can have for school management activities, yet learners and teachers often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play in school management. Duma

and Khuzwayo (2015) further on attest that some teachers love to have learners involved in school management, while others feel that too much learner involvement in school management compromises their sense of professionalism. Duma (2015) affirms that the absence of learner experience from school management brings about the systematic silencing of the learner's voice; this affirmation is confirmed by Duflo et al. (2015), as they state that the inclusion of learners in school management 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 teachers on the role of learners in rural school management by providing theoretical frameworks of learner leadership, the history of learner leadership in South Africa, then discussing methodology and research findings.

Literature Review

This section looks at the brief history of learner leadership in South Africa and traces and reviews the formation of the learner representative councils in South Africa. According to Harber and Mncube (2015), the role of learners in school management has always been at the centre of the struggle for educational transformation in South Africa. They advise that it is therefore important to understand where learner leadership had its origins, and the role it played in the creation of the new South Africa.

Mncube et al. (2015) mention that before 1980, a culmination of a number of factors in

Soweto led to the establishment of the Soweto Students Representative Council (SSRC), which spearheaded the dropping of Afrikaans as a medium of teaching and learning. Consequence to that, Duma (2015) mentions that on 16 June 1976, learners marched through Soweto and the police opened fire at them, killing a thirteen-year-old boy, Hector Peterson.

Mncube (2012) states that after 1980, the Reconstruction and Development Programme advocated that in the field of education and training, structures of institutional governance which reflect the interest of all stakeholders and the broader community served by the institution should be established. Mncube et al. (2015) confirm that this advocacy led to the formation of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) in 1986, which was probably the most significant milestone in the democratisation of education. What it did, was to bring together a large number of actors within the educational sphere (NEPI 1992).

Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) mention that in 1995, the Hunter Report confirmed the participation of learners in school management as it stipulated that the composition of school governing bodies should comprise parents, teachers and learners. According to Duma (2015), the Hunter Report led to the establishment the South African Schools Act (SASA) in 1996, which compelled all public schools in the country to have democratically elected school governing bodies (SGBs) composed of teachers, parents and learners. Harber and Mncube (2015) posit that by the establishment of the SASA, the state aimed at fostering democratic school management and thereby introducing school management structures that involve teachers, learners and parents. Duma (2015) affirms that through the SASA learner involvement in school management was legalised.

Objectives of the Study

There is a great deal of literature both nationally and internationally on the involvement of learners in school management, which includes many arguments supporting it (Abdalla 2014; Ayers et al. 2015; Brasof 2015; McGrath 2015), yet very little research has been conducted on the role of learners in rural school management. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication

that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches to this issue. Mncube (2009) and Harber and Mncube (2015) confirm that literature suggests that listening to learners, encouraging their participation and giving them more power and responsibility lead to a better functioning school. This contention is supported by Chapman et al. (1995) and Mncube et al. (2015), as they argued that a democratic society grows from the roots provided by a democratic school system and, therefore, if a society wants to make itself free, it should give more freedom to schools.

Emphasising the need for learner leadership in schools, Harber and Mncube (2015) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only as one experiences them. Spillane et al. (2004) state that learner leadership is part of democracy in schools that is premised on distributed leadership in which reflective practice is an integral part enabling actions to be critiqued, challenged and developed through cycles of planning, action, reflection and assessment and replanning. 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 management, 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 learners in school management (Grubb and Tredway 2015).

The researcher, having worked in rural schools as a teacher and a principal, perceives that the process of learner involvement in school management of rural schools is difficult to manage because in most rural schools, learners and teachers often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play (Duma 2015).

Compounding this uncertainty are perceptions that teachers and learners have about the roles that the other should play. Some teachers are reluctant to work with learner leaders and

they regard them as intruding and troublesome and others are resistant to collaborate with learner leaders because they have become accustomed to functioning without learner leaders being central to their work (Mncube et al. 2015). The perceptions highlighted, warrant an exploration of the views of teachers on the role of learners in school management.

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 two hundred teachers from KwaZulu Natal Midlands Cluster's two districts, namely Sisonke and Ugu. 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 (Kumar 2014). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as a research instrument. This quantitative methodology was chosen in the light of the purpose of the study, the kind of information that was required and the available resources. As McMillan and Schu-

macher (2006) and Kumar (2014) maintain 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. The researcher believed that this kind of survey would lead to some truths about the role of learners in rural school management and it would provide information on whether certain generalisations presented in the literature were also true for this population.

Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 consisted of questions, which focussed on 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 views held by teachers on the role of learners in rural school management. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree*. Section 3 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein respondents were asked to write down the problems they encounter when attempting to involve learner leaders in school management. Sections 4 consisted also of open-ended questions, wherein teachers had to suggest ways that can improve the performance of learner leaders in their schools.

Administration of the Questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in six schools in Ugu and Sisonke districts. The 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 actual study, the teachers were requested to complete their questionnaires which were later posted to the researcher, using the self-addressed envelope supplied with the questionnaire. The first sample population responses

were 120 (60%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 18 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total of 138 responses (69%). 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 teachers' qualifications 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 teachers (65%) had good academic qualifications. This shows that the education level of teachers in rural schools is improving.

Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) asseverate that success in the execution of teachers' duties including learner management is determined by the extent to which the teachers are educated and this high qualification rate can enable teach-

ers to empower learner leaders with school management skills.

Table 1: Respondents' qualifications

Teachers qualification	N	%
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	90	65
Total	138	100

Teachers' Views on the Role of Learners in Rural School Management

In Table 2, respondents were required to indicate their views on the role of learners in rural school management. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree*.

Learner Leadership Should Focus on Achieving Effective Educational and Social Outcomes for Learners

Table 2 revealed that more than half of the respondents (61%) indicated that they agreed with the statement that learner leadership should focus on achieving effective educational and

Table 2: Teachers' views on the role of learners in rural school management

Items		Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	Total
Learner leadership should focus on achieving effective educational and social outcomes for learners	N	28	56	29	25	138
	%	20	41	21	18	100
Learner leadership should be based on the premises of inclusion and facilitation.	N	27	55	56	0	138
	%	19	40	41	0	100
Learner leaders should be nominated by teachers	N	21	62	41	14	138
	%	15	45	30	10	100
Learner leadership should be responsive to changing expectations while simultaneously affirming the numerous, daily successes that currently occur in schools.	N	55	63	14	6	138
	%	40	46	10	4	100
Learner leadership should improve relationships and foster closer ties between learners and learners	N	100	20	14	4	138
	%	75	12	10	3	100
Learner leadership should contribute to the identity and development of learner personalities	N	20	100	10	8	138
	%	14	73	7	6	100
Learner leadership should expose learners to differing, diverse, and conflicting viewpoints	N	20	100	10	8	138
	%	14	73	7	6	100

social outcomes for learners. Mncube et al. (2015) emphasise the importance of learner leadership in schools as they state that learner leadership needs to focus on the individual learning, psychological, social, and emotional needs of each and every learner. These findings further more confirm Karlsson's (2002) assertion that the SASA mandates all secondary schools to establish Representative Councils for Learners (RCLs), whose main functions are to assist in maintaining order in schools, setting positive example of discipline, promoting good relations between learners and teachers, promoting responsibility and leadership and supporting the educational and social outcomes for all learners in school.

Learner Leadership Should be Based on the Premise of Inclusion and Facilitation

As it is shown in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (70%) agreed that learner leadership should be based on the premise of inclusion and facilitation. This high percentage of respondents once again confirms that the primary emphasis of schooling should be to effectuate the full potential of learners. Duma (2015) avers that the complexities of the increasingly diverse and economically-stratified society mandate all learners to become skilled educational leaders that understand the fine balance between responsiveness to community expectations and advocacy for successful practices. This attestation is confirmed by Duflo et al. (2015) as they state that the inclusion of learners in school management is a practical way to promote democratic values and develop democratic school governance.

Learner Leaders Should be Nominated by Teachers

Table 2 further on revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that they agreed that some members of the RCL should be nominated by teachers. 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 learner leaders must be elected by learners (Province of Western Cape 2003; South Africa 2003; Carr 2005; Mncube 2012). These findings confirm uncertainties and perceptions that teachers and learner

leaders have about the roles that the other should play (Blackbourn 2015; Ayers et al. 2015). This attestation is confirmed by Mncube et al. (2015) as they state that some teachers feel that too much learner involvement in school management violates their sense of professionalism and they are reluctant to work with learners whom they regard as intruding and troublesome. It stands to reason that such teachers would feel more comfortable to nominate their own learner leaders.

Learner Leadership Should be Responsive to Changing Expectations While Simultaneously Affirming the Numerous, Daily Successes that Currently Occur in Schools

As it is shown in Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents (86%) agreed that learner leadership should be responsive to changing expectations while simultaneously affirming the numerous, daily successes that currently occur in schools. This is confirmed by Mncube (2012) and Scott McLeod (2012), when they lay down that skilled learner leaders understand the fine balance between responsiveness to political and community expectations and advocacy for current successful practices. Grubb and Tredway (2015) have observed that the role of the learner leaders in schools is linked to the day-to-day running of the school, and learner leaders are given the opportunity and authority to exercise leadership skills that would enable them to be responsive to changing expectations while simultaneously affirming the numerous, daily successes that currently occur in schools. These findings suggest that in some schools learner leaders do participate actively in school management issues, but this depends on the opportunities to do so and the training that has been offered to them.

Learner Leadership Should Improve Relationships and Foster Closer Ties between Teachers and Learners

Table 2 revealed that more than half of the respondents (87%) indicated that learner leadership should improve relationships and foster closer ties between teachers and learners. Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) state that the main objective of establishing the Representative Council for Learners in schools is to create a sense of

co-responsibility and foster sound interaction among learners and teachers. This statement is supported by Brasof (2015), as he avers that learner leadership structures create a sound and healthy relationship between learners, teachers and non-teaching staff, as well as parents.

The strong support for this item indicates that teachers understand the importance of learner leadership in fostering closer ties between teachers and learners in school management activities. Participation of learners in school management, as required by the SASA is based on the concept that learners as members of the school community have a right to participate in decision-making processes (Harber and Mncube 2015).

Learner Leadership Should Contribute to the Identity and Development of Learner Personalities

Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that learner leadership should contribute to the identity and development of learner personalities. Mncube et al. (2015) affirm that learner leadership enhances the personality development. Learner leaders according to Mncube (2012) concurring with Duma (2015), set positive example of discipline, loyalty, respect, punctuality, academic thoroughness, morality, cooperation and active participation in school management activities. By so doing learner leadership can contribute to the identity and development of learner personalities.

Learner Leadership Should Expose Learners to Differing, Diverse, and Conflicting Viewpoints

In conclusion, Table 2 revealed that a majority of the respondents (87%) indicated that learner leadership facilitates the discussion of conflicting viewpoints and accommodates diverse perspectives of the various groups. Duma and Khuzwayo (2015) confirm that in learner leadership there is an acknowledgement of the varying views which makes consensus possible. The airing of differences and open engagement in exploring assorted opinions and perspectives tends to lead to an appreciation of the strength that diversity can yield. Open conversation allows people to put aside suspicions that arise when conflicting views are cloaked in false con-

sensus. This contention is supported by Whitney and Trosten-Bloom (2010) and De Lissovoy et al. (2015), as they pointed out that the process of *engaging* with the conflicts rather than *suppressing* them somewhat paradoxically enables the organisation to focus on the higher good and execute sustainable strategies more successfully.

The study revealed that the process of involving learners in rural school management is difficult to manage because in most rural schools teachers and learners often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play (Addi-Racah and, Ainhoren 2009; Duma 2015 ; Harber and Mncube 2015). The study revealed uncertainties and perceptions that teachers and learner leaders often have about the roles that the other should play. Some teachers feel that too much learner involvement in school management violates their sense of professionalism. Mncube et al. (2015) attest that some teachers are reluctant to work with learners and they regard them as intruding and troublesome.

Since this paper intended to explore the views of teachers on the role of learners in school management in South Africa, in conclusion, respondents had to cite problems they encounter when attempting to involve learners in school management and these problems are summed up as the following:

- ♦ Learner leaders do not support teachers in the performance of their duties,
- ♦ Learner leaders interfere with school management activities,
- ♦ Learner leaders do not regularly interact with teachers,
- ♦ Learner leaders interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on,
- ♦ Learner leaders often miss scheduled meetings of school management,
- ♦ Learner leaders involve themselves in as many student activities; hence they lose focus,
- ♦ Learner leaders lack understanding of their role in school management activities.

CONCLUSION

The investigation considered the views of teachers on the role of learners in rural school management in South Africa. The study explored the actual or theoretical involvement of learners in rural school management; the history of learn-

er leadership in South Africa; what barriers exist to learner involvement in school management; the training of learner leaders and whether teachers have contributed to the development and empowerment of learner leaders. The study found that in South Africa learner leaders still experience problems in rural school management, despite the establishment of the SASA which mandates all schools to have learners participating in school management activities. Further findings suggest that teachers had a qualified support of the role of learners in school management, as they maintain that level of learner involvement in school management should be limited and prescribed. Overall, the study found that the establishment of the Representative Council for Learners broke a new ground for learner participation in school management activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

From this study the following recommendations are made:

- ♦ Schools should build the necessary frameworks and communication avenues for developing learner leadership,
- ♦ Teachers need to know more about learner leadership and its contribution to schools,
- ♦ Teachers need to participate in special programmes focused on learner leadership,
- ♦ Teacher training programmes should give enough attention and centrality to learner leadership.

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