

Silent Leadership: Educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in the governance of rural secondary schools

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Abstract

The article explored views held by educators on the role of student leadership in the governance of rural secondary schools in South Africa. An argument is presented that although student leadership in schools is taken as a fait accompli, the reality is that in rural schools, this still remains a wishful thinking. Apart from a literature review on educator perceptions on student leadership, empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from educators about their perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural schools. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for rural schools to establish student leadership structures and give these structures necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance, as their participation involves among other things planning, organizing, leading, supervising, decision-making and controlling, which are some of the management duties of school governance structures.

Keywords: Educators, perceptions, Representative Council of Learners, rural secondary schools, school governance, student leadership

1. Introduction

Since 1996, the South African government introduced several reforms in the form of education policies and legislations intended to democratize education and school practice. The most comprehensive of these reforms are catered for in the South African Schools Act: Act No 84 of 1996 (SASA). The SASA is a tool by which education in South Africa is democratized through the establishment of democratic structures of school governance in all public schools. Democratization includes the idea that stakeholders such as parents, teachers, students and community members 'must' participate in the activities of the school (Mabena, 2002, p. 58). SASA prescribes that parents comprise the majority of the school governing body (SGB) members and that the SGB must include the principal and elected representatives of educators and support staff. In public secondary schools students in the eighth grade or higher at the school must be represented on the SGB. These schools must establish a Representative Council of Learners (RCL), elected by the students (RSA, 1996, p.56). The student representatives in school governing bodies provide the students with a legitimate role to play in school governance (RSA, 2001, p.57).

Consequently, the aim of the article is to probe the views held by educators on the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools, problems encountered by educators when attempting to involve students in school governance and the suggestions the educators have on improving the performance of Representative Councils of Learners in their schools. It is difficult to dispute the benefits that student leadership can have for students' school experiences, yet student leaders and educators often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play. Compounding these uncertainties are the perceptions that educators and student leaders often have about the roles that the other should play. Some educators love to have student leaders intricately involved in school governance, while others feel that too much student involvement in school governance violates their sense of professionalism. Some educators are resistant to collaborate with student leaders 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 absence of student experience from school governance brings about the systematic silencing of the student's voice. The current trend in the international community recognizes the right of the child to access to education, and also requires the right of the student to participate in decision-making (Carr, 2005, p.299). The inclusion of students in school governance is a practical way to promote democratic values and develop democratic school governance. The question arises, how educators perceive student leadership in rural secondary schools. The present study focuses on the rural educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership and their involvement in school governance and it also examines the educators' analysis of the Representative Councils of Learners' current situation in their schools.

As educators hold a pivotal role in the successful implementation of student leadership, focusing on this question above, can contribute to a better understanding of the conditions under which schools can benefit from student leadership and student involvement in school governance. First, the background to the study is provided, next, genesis and context of student leadership in South Africa are presented and the method of investigation and results are discussed. Finally, the implications of the findings are outlined.

2. Background to the study

A cross-section of the field of education management reveals that very little research has been conducted on the perception of educators of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools. 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 (Oosthuizen, 2004, p. i). 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. This study focuses on the perceptions of educators of the role of student leadership and also involving students in school governance activities, which means including them in school decisions and developing them as student governors for the purpose of promoting quality education for all students. Success in the execution of school governance duties by student leaders is determined by the extent to which the student leaders have received good capacity building and empowerment skills in student leadership. Student leaders are an important component within the school governance, to which educators must be responsive and they are expected to be active partners who have influence over school decision-making and participate in school activities and governance. The empowerment of both student leaders and educators is assumed to contribute to effective school governance.

3. The genesis and context of student leadership in South Africa

This section presents a concise genesis and the context of student leadership in South Africa. It looks at the history of student leadership in South Africa and traces and reviews the formation of the student representative councils in South Africa. The role of the student leaders differed from area to area, and also between urban and rural areas. According to O'Connell (1991, p. 234), it is important to note that the issue of democratic school governance, and especially the role of student leaders, has always been at the centre of the struggle for educational transformation throughout the country. It is therefore important to understand where student leadership had its origins, and the role it played in the creation of the new South Africa.

3.1 Pre 1980 Period

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 Brooks and Brickhill (1980, p.95-96). In 1976, there was a standoff between the Meadowlands Tswana School Board and Department of Bantu Education as the board refused to use Afrikaans as medium of instruction (Sithole, 1995, p. 61). On 16 June 1976, students marched through Soweto and the police confronted them. According to reports, police fired tear-gas canisters into the crowd, and the students retaliated by throwing stones at the police. Police then opened fire at the students and a thirteen-year-old Hector Peterson was the first to be shot dead (Sithole, 1995, p. 62). The formation of the Soweto Students Representative Council was thus the forerunner to the Student Representative Councils in the secondary schools.

Sithole (1995, p. 95) further on commented on the relationship between role players at school as follows: "Evidence in most schools with democratically elected Student Representative Councils, which were established with the full approval and support of parents, the principals and teachers, reveals that the relationship between the principals, parents, teachers and students is qualitatively improved". In these schools all major policy decisions dealing with the organization and management of the schools were not taken without consultation. Sithole (1995, p.96) also contends that the Student Representative Councils that were established without the blessing of the principals, parents and teachers operated in a hostile and confrontational school environment. Any issue that the students needed to address was therefore done by employing force or disruptive strategy since there were no channels in place to deal with their grievances in a structured manner.

3.2 Post 1980 period

The Reconstruction and Development Program 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 (ANC, 1994, p.6). The above principle of inclusiveness was endorsed by the African National Congress Education Department when they mooted that the governance structure of all schools should include parents, teachers and students as elected representatives of constituent groupings.

The main players in the education arena were National Party, the then ruling party and the Mass Democratic Movement, that consisted of a large number of organizations. The formation of the Congress of South African Students (COSAS) broadened the struggle against apartheid. However, it was the formation of the United Democratic Front (UDF) in August 1983 that was most significant because it unified a large number of local civic organizations, as well as regional and national anti-apartheid formations into a single, front to oppose the apartheid regime. The education clause of the Freedom Charter “the doors of learning and culture should be open to all” became a “benchmark for transforming the education system” (Johnson, 1995, p.131). The formation of the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) in 1986 was probably the most significant milestone in the democratization of education. What it did, was to bring together a large number of actors within the educational sphere, and representing all stakeholders.

It incorporated the political power of students into a much broader, deeper and more mature alliance of forces in the education sector than had hitherto been possible. The NECC thus concretized the understanding of the connection between the educational struggle and the broader political struggle and laid the basis for the concept of “People’s Education for people’s power”. People’s Education is summarized in the words of Sisulu by Nzimande (1993, p. 58): “When we fight for and achieve democratic SRCs and parents committees, we are starting to realize our demands that the People Shall Govern and that the Doors of Learning and Culture Shall be Opened”. The NECC conference held in March 1986 was convened to coordinate the activities of the education organizations concerned with the crisis in education. The discourse on the development of a People’s Education gained momentum and prominence when the NECC supported the establishment of PTAs in schools (Karlsson, 2002:132). According to Sithole (1995, p.133), the inclusion of students in Parent-Teachers-Associations was perceived very positively as a means to address the day-to-day crises in schools.

3.3 Post 1990 period

The Educational Renewal Strategy (ERS) document and the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) both advocated increased learner participation in school governance through the policy of educational decentralization. In order to establish the principle of greater responsibility among the community for school education, management councils were established in schools in which learners were given an observer status (NEPI, 1992, p.79-80). The ANC Policy Framework for Education and Training, (ANC, 1994, p. 87) propagated “a balance between the responsibilities of national and provincial government and popular participation in policy development and implementation through structures of governance and consultation” (Zafar, 1999, p.4). The 1995 Hunter Report confirmed the participation of students in school governance as it stipulated that the composition of governing bodies, in secondary schools, should comprise parents, teachers and students (Hunter, 1995, p. 23). In 1996, the South African Schools Act legalized student participation in school governance, as it stated that a representative council of learners at school must be established at every public school enrolling learners in grade eight and higher.

4 Method of Investigation

4.1 Research Design and Instrumentation

4.1.1 Nature of research design

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.

4.1.2 Population and sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select two hundred educators from KwaZulu Natal Midlands Cluster’s two districts, namely Sisonke and Ugu. This method was favored 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, p. 210).

4.1.3 Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as 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. The researcher believed that this kind of survey would lead to some truths about the educators’ perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools and it would provide information on whether certain generalizations presented in the literature were also true for this population.

(a) 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.

Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in secondary schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree. Section 3 had also closed questions focusing on the educators' analysis of the Representative Council of Learners' current situation in their school. Questions in this section were operationalized using the following three-point scale and the respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: Yes, Unsure, No. Sections 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein educators had to suggest ways that can improve the performance of student leaders in their schools.

(b) 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 educators 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.

5. 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. Frequency distribution was used.

6. Results and Discussions

6.1 Educators' Qualifications

Table 1. Educators' Qualifications

Table 1 revealed that more than half of the respondents (65%) had standard 10 and more than three years qualification, another 22% had standard 10 (grade 12) plus two year qualification and only 13% had standard 10 (grade 12) plus one year qualification. That confirmed the assertion that the education level of educators was improving and they were eager to improve their qualifications. Success in the execution of educators' duties including student management is determined by the extent to which the educators are educated.

6.2 Educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools

Table 2. Educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools

- Secondary schools are not compelled to have Representative Council of Learners

Table 2 revealed that more than half of the respondents (61%) indicated that they did not agree with the statement that secondary schools were not compelled to have Representative Council of Learners. This high percentage was disturbing because in terms of the South African Schools Act of 1996, a representative council of learners at school must be established at every public school enrolling learners in grade eight and higher and a Member of the Executive Council may, by notice in the Provincial Gazette, determine guidelines for the establishment, election and functions of the representative councils of learners.

- Secondary schools can have the prefect system if they wish so

As it is shown in Table 2, the majority of the respondents (70%) agreed that secondary schools could 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 recognized and legal representative body for students at schools (Western Cape DoE, 2003, p.1). The intention of this amendment was to make schools aware that by persisting with the old traditional prefect system they were breaking the law. The amendment is reinforcing the role to be played by the Representative Council of Learners by strengthening the legal side to its implementation.

- Secondary schools can have both the prefects and Representative Council of Learners

Table 2 also revealed that more than half of the respondents (59%) agreed that the secondary schools can have both the prefects and Representative Council of Learners. As indicated in the above paragraph, the Act stipulates that only a Representative Council of Learners is the official body representing all students in secondary schools, and any other body is illegal. Therefore, prefects are illegal in schools.

- The educators and the principal must be allowed to nominate some members of the Representative Council of Learners

Table 2 further on revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that they agreed that the educators and the principal must be allowed to nominate some members of the Representative Council of Learners. This is against the dictates of the South African Schools Act and the stipulations of the Provincial Gazette Extraordinary (5946), dated 31 January 2003 which both asseverate that the composition of a representative council of learners should consist of 3 representatives for each grade from grade 8 and higher. This means that at most secondary schools the Representative Council of Learners will have 15 members.

- The Representative Council of Learners interferes with school administration if it assumes some of the responsibility of planning and executing the activities of schools

As it is shown in Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents (86%) agreed that the Representative Council of Learners interferes with school administration if it assumes some of the responsibility of planning and executing the activities of schools. The strong support for this item indicates that educators do not know the role of the Representative Council of Learners in schools, which is linked to the day-to-day running of the school, and learner leaders are given the opportunity and authority to exercise leadership skills in selected areas of management such as supervision, discipline, organizing of activities, etc (Carr, 2005, p.199).

6.3 Educators ' analysis of the Representative Council of Learners' current situation in school

Table 3. Educators ' analysis of the Representative Council of Learners' current situation in school

- The Representative Council of Learners is not always consulted, when learner issues are discussed by educators

Table 3 revealed that more than half of the respondents (87%) indicated that in their schools the Representative Council of Learners was not always consulted, when learner issues are discussed by educators. This implies that most schools are not following the dictates of the Department of Education that stipulate that learners should have a part in the determination of activities which so deeply affect their lives. Participation of students in school governance, as required by the South African Schools Act is based on the concept that students as members of the school community have a right to participate in decision-making processes.

- The Representative Council of Learners' regularly interacts with educators

Table 3 revealed that 62% of the respondents indicated that the Representative Council of Learners does not regularly interact with educators; whereas 34% indicated that there were not sure and only 4% indicated that there are regular interactions between the Representative Council of Learners' and educators. This implies that most schools do not really use the Representative Council of Learners to promote democratic participation. The majority of schools is still authoritarian and reinforces passive subordination amongst the learners. The policy maintains that the Representative Council of Learners acts as an important instrument for liaison and communication and must meet at fairly regular intervals, with educators and other school stakeholders to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and even complaints from its constituencies.

- The Representative Council of Learners interferes in issues that they do not have any knowledge on

Table 3 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (87%) indicated that the Representative Council of Learners interferes in issues that they do not have any knowledge on; whereas 13% indicated that they are unsure. The Representative Council of Learners plays a pivotal role in democratizing the education landscape. The Representative Council of Learners in schools are structures that represent the voice of the learners. They provide space for learners to articulate their needs, concerns, aspirations as well as present their wishes to the schools.

- The Representative Council of Learners helps educators to organize cultural and sporting events

Table 3 revealed that less than half of the respondents (32%) indicated that in their schools the Representative Council of Learners' helps educators to organize cultural and sporting events, whereas (28%) indicated that they are unsure and close to half of the respondents (40%) indicated that that does not happen in their schools. The policy stipulates that the Representative Council of Learners should aim to promote sport and cultural activities within the school community and must foster student participation in school activities.

- The Representative Council of Learners works with the educators to promote a culture of learning in the school

Table 3 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that the Representative Council of Learners' in their schools, does not work with the educators to promote a culture of learning in the school, despite the fact that the Department of Education contends that learners are an indispensable component of democratic school governance at the secondary school level, and that they have earned the right to participate in school governance and promotion of the culture of learning in schools.

- The Representative Council of Learners supports the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties

Once again, Table 3 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that the Representative Councils of Learners' in their schools did not support the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties. The main objective of establishing the Representative Council of Learners is to create a sense of co-responsibility. It is also an attempt to create a sound and healthy relationship between learners, educators and non-educators, as well as parents. It fosters sound interaction among learners and teachers.

- The Representative Council of Learners helps the register educators with administrative duties during the register period.

More than half of the respondents (68%) as revealed in Table3 indicated that the Representative Council of Learners in their schools does not help the register educators with administrative duties during the register period. The policy stipulates that among the functions of the Representative Council of Learners members is helping the register teacher with administrative duties during the register period.

- The Representative Council of Learners causes some educators to feel that they lose control over their work

It seems that the educators in this survey are concerned that the Representative Council of Learners causes them to feel that they lose control over their work. As can be seen from Table 3, a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that the Representative Council of Learners causes some of them to feel that they lose control over their work. This is not surprising because most of the schools surveyed were before 1994 under the Kwazulu Department of Education & Culture, which considered the idea of students being involved in school governance as something absurd. It held the belief that decisions about education lay squarely in the domain of the parents, principals and teachers, while learners should concentrate on their studies (Zafar, 1999, p.3). So, involving students would tantamount to educators losing their status and influence in schools.

6.4 Educators' suggestions on improving the performance of the Representative Council of Learners in their schools (Analyzed according to the frequency rate)

In an open –ended question, educators were required to make suggestions on what can be done to improve the performance of Representative Council of Learners in their schools. Their responses were ranked in the order of frequency as follows:

- Schools should build the necessary frameworks and communication avenues for developing student leadership (80%)
- Educators need to know more about student leadership and its contribution to school (73%)
- Educators need to modify their attitudes towards student leaders and learn how to work effectively with them (67%)
- Educators need to participate in special programs focused on student leadership (64%)
- Educator training programs should give enough attention and centrality to student leadership (55%)
- Student leaders' role in schools should be redesigned to lead to better collaboration with educators (46%)

7. Summary of the findings

This summary of the findings is not exhaustive but only deals with salient issues that emerged from the study, as discussed below.

7.1 The educators' educational background

The empirical survey revealed that a high proportion of rural educators have good teacher education qualification, that education background can form a good base for the establishment of training programs. The less educated the educator is, the more likely it she/he will be reluctant to become involved in training programs.

7.2 Educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools

Educators want the Representative Council of Learners not to be compelled in schools. This is disturbing because in terms of SASA , a representative council of learners at school must be established at every public school enrolling students in grade eight and higher, and the Education Amendment Act (Act No. 57 of 2001) dictates that the Representative Council of Learners is the only recognized and legal representative body for students at schools. The study further more found out that educators assert that schools have an option between the prefect system and the Representative Council of Learners. This assertion is not true. The intention of the Amendment Act was to make schools aware that by persisting with the old traditional prefect system they are breaking the law. The study also found out that educators agreed that the educators and the principal must be allowed to nominate some members of the Representative Council of Learners. This is also against the stipulations of both the South African Schools Act and the Provincial Gazette Extraordinary (5946), which asseverate that the representatives for each grade are elected separately by the learners in the grade concerned and the school principal or his/her delegate acts as the electoral officer only.

7.2 Educators ' analysis of the Representative Council of Learners' current situation in their schools

The empirical survey also revealed that schools do not always consult the Representative Council of Learners, when dealing with matters that affect students as per the requirements of the government policy.

The study also found out that the Representative Council of Learners interferes in issues that they do not have any knowledge on, and do not support the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties. The survey further on revealed that some educators feel that they lose control over their work because of the Representative Council of Learners. In conclusion, the study revealed that in order for Representative Council of Learners to be effective and well performing, schools should build the necessary frameworks and communication avenues for developing learner leadership, educators need to modify their attitudes towards student leaders and learn how to work effectively with them and the educator training programs should give enough attention and centrality to student leadership.

8. Conclusion

The study has revealed that despite the 17 years of constitutional democracy in South Africa and the fact that RCLs are the only legal structures representative of students in schools, some schools still experience the presence of prefects. The establishment of RCLs broke a new ground for student participation in school governance, which differed from all previous systems in that it was the first system to have a statutory basis (RSA, 2003, p.11). This study has revealed that there are different educator perceptions of the role that students should play in school leadership. Some educators regard student participation in school governance as critical for the democratization of the education system. Other educators agreed that students do have a role to play in school governance. However, they maintained that their level of involvement should be limited and prescribed. Their main premise is that there are certain aspects of school governance where the involvement of students would be undesirable. Examples cited by Sithole (1995, p.98) are those involving the discipline of educators. It should however, be noted that educators should not underestimate the contributions of students in school governance matters, especially when they are given opportunities to develop their skills and level of maturity. Mabena (2002, p. 26) suggests that where students fail to make meaningful contributions, the reason may be found in the educators' attitude displayed towards them.

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Table 1 Educators' Qualifications

Education 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

Table 2. Educators' perceptions of the role of student leadership in rural secondary schools

Items		Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Secondary schools are not compelled to have RCL	N	29	25	28	56	138
	%	21	18	20	41	100
Secondary schools can have the prefect system if they wish so	N	41	55	28	14	138
	%	30	40	20	10	100
Secondary schools can have both the prefects and RCL	N	27	55	56	0	138
	%	19	40	41	0	100
The educators and the principal must be allowed to nominate some members of the RCL	N	21	62	41	14	138
	%	15	45	30	10	100
The RCL interferes with school administration if it assumes some of the responsibility of planning and executing the activities of schools	N	55	63	14	6	138
	%	40	46	10	4	100

Table 3. Educators' analysis of the Representative Council of Learners' current situation in their schools

Items		Yes	Unsure	No	TOTAL
The RCL is not always consulted, when student issues are discussed by educators	N	120	4	14	138
	%	87	3	10	100
The RCL regularly interacts with educators	N	47	5	85	138
	%	34	4	62	100
The RCL interferes in issues that they do not have any knowledge on	N	120	18	0	138
	%	87	13	0	100
The RCL helps educators to organize cultural and sporting events	N	44	39	55	138
	%	32	28	40	100
The RCL works with the educators to promote a culture of learning in the school.	N	28	0	110	138
	%	20	0	80	100
The RCL supports the principal, educators and non-teaching staff in the performance of their duties	N	28	0	110	138
	%	20	0	80	100
The RCL helps the register educators with administrative duties during the register period.	N	44	0	94	138
	%	32	0	68	100
The RCL causes some educators to feel that they lose control over their work	N	107	3	28	138
	%	78	2	20	100