

Giving voice to the voiceless through deliberative democratic school governance

Nonceba Mabovula

nmabovula@yahoo.co.uk

I focus on the role of learners in the governance of secondary schools. I seek to promote a voice for learner expression as guaranteed in the national Department of Education's guidelines for Representative Council of Learners as part of promoting democratic governance. The potential, limitations, constraints, consequences, and challenges facing learners in the school governance structure need to be revealed and debated. The views of school principals were solicited by means of unstructured open-ended questionnaires. Six problem areas emerged from the data. The irony is that although the democratisation of school governance has given all stakeholders a powerful voice in school affairs, learners' voices are, seemingly, being silenced. In attempting to resolve the problem, a new model of democratic school governance to be known as 'deliberative democratic school governance' (DDSG) is suggested. There are several DDSG approaches that can be employed in creating elements for stakeholder empowerment and in driving deliberative democratic school governance forward. These include inclusion, motivational communication, consensus, deliberation/dialogue, collaboration, and conflict resolution. Some school governance stakeholders and schools may use only one or a few of these strategies to create spaces for learner voices in their respective schools.

Keywords: deliberative democracy; learners; principals; school governance; South African Schools Act

Introduction

With the dawning of democracy in 1994, the South African education system embarked on an all-important democratisation process. In schools, this approach included attempts to dismantle the concentration of power to include all stakeholders in the governance of schools to ensure that education in its entirety would be geared towards development. This led to the promulgation of the South African Schools Act (SASA), which states that "a Representative Council of Learners at the school must be established at every public school enrolling learners in the eighth grade or higher and such council is the only recognised and legitimate learner body at the school" (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1996:18). This means that a school governance structure should involve all school stakeholder groups, as the idea of co-operation lies at the heart of this Act. Furthermore, in 1999 the national Department of Education (DoE) issued a set of guidelines (Guide) for Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) as part of its policy of promoting democratic governance in South African schools. Among the roles defined for an RCL is that it should provide "a voice for learner expression" (RSA, 1996).

According to Sithole (1995:107), a key principle of democratic school

governance is that decisions be based on consultation, collaboration, co-operation, partnership, mutual trust and participation of all affected parties in the school community. This is a participatory conception of democracy, one that conceives of stakeholders as permanently engaged in dialogue, presupposes both literacy on the part of individuals and a system that encourages the formation of personal opinions, and provides the channels for participation. However, this is not the case in some black schools. This problem in schools is compounded by the fact that the South African Schools Act (SASA), which is supposed to give guidance to schools, portrays a narrow conception of democratic participation. After repeatedly studying the contents of the South African Schools Act, I became convinced that it lacks a conception of participatory democracy, is superficial and trivial and does not spell out how this participation could take place or be achieved for good governance in schools. It is only the preamble to the Schools Act that comes close to the pronouncement of democratic co-operation, but it is silent on democratic participation.

Moreover, the Guide's vision for Representative Councils of Learners gives minimal and conditional roles to members of the RCL. For example, one of the conditions related to the roles of the RCL states the following: "In appropriate cases, an RCL provides learners with an opportunity to participate in decision making regarding the school" (RSA, 1996:12). This means that learners are to participate in "appropriate cases". Nevertheless, neither the DoE guidelines nor the Schools Act spells out exactly what "appropriate cases" would be.

The idea of the exclusion of learners from school governance has been widely researched by both South African and international researchers. South African researchers such as Mathebula (2001), Nkwinti (2001), Sithole (1998), and Chinsamy (1995) support the above assertions. These writers have highlighted a variety of non-participatory contributory factors such as teachers' dominance in SGB meetings, manipulation of learners by teachers, learners being used as a form of "window dressing" for SGB approval by government, and learners being used as a kind of tokenism just to appease them. All these factors inhibit the development of the democratic participation of learners in school governance and have the potential to undermine the noble ideals of SGBs. According to Fraser (as cited by Makubu, 1993), the alienation of learners from such an important decision-making body leads to learner frustration and this could have a negative impact on education. Fletcher (2003:2) supports this view: "[B]y denying these learners' representatives the primary tool of decision-making on school boards, these adults serve to 'negate' the voice of students and encourage their use as merely a 'stamp of approval'".

My main purpose in this article is to suggest how stakeholders in school governance could attempt to address this problem by utilising deliberative democratic school governance as a tentative solution. The focus is not on representation of learners on the SGB structure but on helping create space for them to argue deliberatively. In South Africa, school governance stakeholders, which include learners, are regarded as juridical persons. Although

statutory learners are included as decision makers in the structure of school governance, that does not mean that they are participating. The fact that learners have access to participation does not necessarily mean they are in fact participating, let alone engaging with other stakeholders. At present, processes of debate and decision making in school governance often marginalise learners because the norms of discussion are biased towards expression that is favourable to educators. It is hoped that the recognition of voices and differences, which is central to my argument, will help to give a voice to the voiceless (the learners). Therefore the critical focus here is the inclusion of learners as decision-makers as stipulated by the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) guides. The question is: What idea of democratic participation could prevent the exclusion of learner voices from the school governance structure? I based this article on an inquiry that was guided by the following objectives:

- To investigate learner participation in governance in five schools in the Eastern Cape;
- To identify hindrances to learner participation in these five schools; and
- To suggest guidelines for deliberative democratic school governance.

I now move on to a theoretical framework which will guide my argument to a deliberative democratic idea of school governance.

Deliberative democratic school governance defined

Deliberative democratic school governance (DDSG) will be a self-renewal strategy to be managed collaboratively on a consensual basis by all members of school governance. It will need to be carefully planned and implemented in order to benefit all stakeholders. It is an educational strategy that is intended to change the beliefs, attitudes and values of school governance stakeholders so that they can better adapt to change. Its long-term goal will be to increase the school governance capacity for self-revitalisation, increase its stakeholder ability to adapt to new conditions, solve problems and create a culture that focuses on the continuous growth of the schooling system as a whole (Mabovula, 2008:302).

Theoretical review: Arguing for deliberative democracy

The theoretical framework is informed by the work of a deliberative theorist, Young (1990; 1996), and her theory of inclusion. She describes inclusion as the cornerstone of democracy and emphasises that the prevention of exclusion is paramount. A discussion of the ideas of this thinker paves the way for an argument in favour of inclusive democratic participation, which may positively influence life in the SGBs. Young (2000) discusses how deliberative democracy could be used to widen democratic inclusion and break the cycle of political inequality. She argues that participants should not put their differences aside to invoke a common goal, but that different social segments in society should struggle through discussion by engaging with one another across their differences. The basic concept is that each school governance

individual is to be treated equally, and with due regard to his/her actual personal preferences.

Young (1990) calls for the inclusion of individuals and/or groups who will be affected by the policy decision under consideration as an important and necessary requirement to achieve true democratic legitimacy. She asserts that the conditions of inclusion entail the interaction among participants in a democratic decision-making process in which people hold one another accountable (Young, 1990). Habermas (1996:147), who supports this view, maintains that the rights of people to participate in deliberation are legally institutionalised without any individual being excluded. This, according to Young (2000), increases the chances that those who make proposals will transform their positions from an initial self-regarding stance to a more objective appeal to justice, because they must listen to others with differing positions to which they are answerable. Even if they disagree with the outcome, political actors must accept the legitimacy of a decision if it was arrived at through an inclusive process of public discussion. The norm of inclusion, in Young's view, is therefore also a powerful means for criticising the legitimacy of nominally democratic processes and decisions. Young is supported by Habermas (1996) who puts forward the idea of a public deliberation.

The concept of the public sphere as discussed by Habermas (1996) and other theorists includes several requirements for authenticity. These include open access, voluntary participation outside institutional roles, and the generation of public judgement through assemblies of citizens who engage in political deliberation, the freedom to express opinions, and the freedom to discuss matters of the state and criticise the way state power is organised. Young (2000) further contends that inclusion and democracy broaden the understanding of democratic participation by reflecting on the positive political functions of narrative, rhetorically situated appeals, and public protest. According to her, they reconstruct concepts of civil society and the public sphere as enacting such plural forms of communication among debating citizens in large-scale societies. Young (2000:3) suggests that, in order to achieve inclusion, there must be consensus as to the supremacy of the transformative ideal before there can be democracy. Consensus is described by theorists such as Habermas as an agreement to address a certain topic or follow a direction for a limited time. He believes that for democratic participation to happen there should be consensus which should take place through deliberation and reasoning (Habermas, 1996).

Young explores the idea of listening to one another and suggests that listening to the other is more respectful of one's unique individual position as it is the only way to respect the uniqueness and "irreplaceability" of each person (Young, 1990:1-2). According to Young (1990), in striving towards the ideals of deliberation, most notably the goals of reciprocity and reasonableness where participants engage in public discussion, participants may not only express their own view, but also listen to and learn from others. For her, mutual justification means not merely offering reasons to other people, or

even offering reasons that they happen to accept (for example, because they are in a weak bargaining position). It also means providing reasons that constitute a justification for imposing binding laws on them. She believes that mutual justification requires reference to substantive values (Young, 1990: 34). According to Habermas (1996), without public discussions in which mutual understanding of key issues and needs is achieved, the democratic process, and by extension the legitimacy of the political system, will fail.

Young also puts forward a concept of rhetoric in her idea of listening to one another. Rhetoric allows speakers to listen carefully to what others have to say, thus building respect for the viewpoints of others. This enables participants to recognise what they have to say to one another, which in turn establishes conditions for deliberation and relations of trust. Young further sees justice not as fairness, but as liberation, defined in part as the development of the capacities of all individuals. In this way she develops the idea of inclusion of all voices. This concern with one's "interchangeability" with others does not, however, inspire in Young the kind of individualism in which individuals are seen as being exclusively responsible for their fate (Young, 1999:1).

Young's (1990) concern with the development of individuality itself, and with the flourishing of individuals, leads her to examine those social and economic constraints that prevent such development from taking place. She is supported by Guttman and Thompson (1996), who argue that deliberative democracy could be most useful in addressing difficult moral issues where there is substantial disagreement. In other words, in their view deliberation should be used specifically for those issues that Young identifies as requiring struggle, since deliberative democracy calls for a more inclusive and purposeful set of representatives to engage in discussions of public importance. This idea is taken further by Benhabib (1996) whose model requires that we recognise all beings capable of speech and action to be participants in the moral conversation, i.e. the principle of universal respect. This means that if all stakeholders argue about a particular issue and a set of normative assertions, they must eventually come to a reasonable agreement and that reasonable agreement must be arrived at under conditions that correspond to our idea of a fair debate.

Young, who also believes in narratives, is among the researchers who argue for making a case for narratives (Young, 2000). By arguing for narratives, Young aims to integrate persons with different voices, since this approach recognises that all persons have a voice and are different, and that they have a right to participate in public life. She further argues that persons with different voices (including learners) have a right to participate in public life. For her the importance of dialogue lies in the fact that it creates an enabling environment to resolve issues amicably. Furthermore, it helps construct an account of the web of social relations between people (Roederer & Moellendorf, 2004). This web of social relations, according to these authors, is what Arendt (1968) calls "the web of human relations", which both relates and separates people and reveals the connected implications and effects of

multiple narratives and critical questioning.

Finally, if Young's ideas could be accepted in the school governance structure, deliberation in its ideal form could lead to more just outcomes for the benefit of not only school governance but the school community at large. They would be able to reconstruct concepts in the SGB structure by privileging communication among members, and because of such initiatives, inclusion would be achieved. For example, inclusion and democracy would broaden stakeholders' understanding of democratic participation where members would be able to listen to one another and in the process take binding decisions for the benefit of the school. For example, the benefits of group inclusion for school governance would restrict discrimination of one group by another, as familiarity and tolerance reduce fear and rejection.

People who communicate with each other do not have individual differences; rather, this process of communication would enable members of school governance to take joy in living in the midst of such difference and in the process of managing conflict to the best of their ability. In school governance, the heart of consensus should be a co-operant intent where the members are willing to work together to find the solution that meets the needs of that particular group. In addition, through the use of dialogue, school governance members would actively listen to and understand others' point of view, and this would enable them to speak and describe their point of view while working to build a shared understanding. Finally, if conflict is not handled effectively, the results could be damaging and conflicting goals could quickly turn into personal dislike. Applying conflict resolution techniques to school governance would provide space for these tensions identified above and would allow high emotions to be dealt with more constructively before they lead to unmanageable and often violent situations.

The research design

Interpretive paradigm: Narrative approach

A narrative inquiry guided this study. Narrative approach is an interpretive, qualitative method of research. The idea behind the use of narratives is to help reveal or discover the untold stories of educators, or part of what is actually taking place in the structure of school governance, and to retell it for the sake of democratic participation and inclusive unity. The narrative method allows for the telling of and listening to the stories. Young posits that storytelling is often an important means by which members of collectives identify one another, and identify the basis of their affinity (Young, 2000:73). It is Young's view that the narrative exchanges give reflective voice to situated experiences and help affinity groupings give an account of their own individual identities in relation to their social positioning and their affinities with others. She further asserts that people often use narrative as a means of politicising their situation, by reflecting on the extent to which they experience similar problems and what political remedy they may propose for themselves. According to Young, examples of such local public's emerging reflective stories

include the processes of “consciousness-raising” where problems are not yet recognised. In my inquiry stories were solicited from principals of schools through the use of questionnaires and were interpreted using themes.

In this research, a case study research design was used involving five schools in the Mthatha area of the Eastern Cape. A case study approach in this regard helped me gain insight into the phenomenon (democratic participation of learners) as it permitted an in-depth search of meanings and reasons. The use of case studies is associated particularly with small-scale research, focusing on one instance (or a few instances) of a particular phenomenon with a view to providing an in-depth account of events, relationships, experiences or processes occurring in that particular instance (Babbie, 2001:285). Hence, the case study approach is not a method for collecting data, but rather a research strategy whereby a variety of research methods such as interviews, observation, and questionnaires can be used.

I used purposive sampling, which is a common feature of qualitative research (Brink, 1996). The characteristic features of this kind of sampling are that it is usually more convenient and economical and that it allows the researcher to handpick the sample, based on knowledge of the area and phenomena being studied. It is, however, important to highlight that other stakeholders are not considered as participants in this article. Principals were handpicked because they are accountable for everything that goes on in their schools. Furthermore, at that moment I only intended to capture their views and perceptions outside other stakeholders. Moreover, subsection 21 (2 and 3) of the Act maintains that principals are compulsory members of the governing body of a public school.

According to Brink (1996), this kind of sampling uses the judgement of the researcher to select those subjects who, in the researcher’s view, know the most about the phenomena and who are able to articulate and explain nuances to the researcher (Field & Morse, 1985). Robson (1999:141) sees this kind of sampling as the researcher’s judgement as to typicality or interest. Senior secondary schools (Grades 8–12), which are not as easy to manage as primary schools, were used for their complexity as organisations. These are the only schools in which RCLs are permitted.

Additional factors such as the size of the school, the advancing maturity of learners, peer group pressure were taken into account. The technique used to achieve a research goal depends on how the information is generated. Research conducted in this form frequently uses a number of approaches in the collection and analysis of data, such as questionnaires, interviews, observations and written accounts by the subjects. However, in my inquiry, data were collected using questionnaires from five school principals. The value of choosing a questionnaire for this particular inquiry was not that the questionnaires brought me closer to more plausible perspectives of school governance, but that I felt that there was a need to elicit as much data as possible using a questionnaire to break the ice and enter into the principal’s world of storytelling. Questionnaires are easy to analyse and are very cost-effective when compared to face-to-face interviews. The criterion for selection of the schools

was that these were the schools I had used for piloting this study prior to the actual research. Moreover, these schools are closer to me and therefore it was more convenient to use them.

Data analysis

Data from five principals of different schools are presented in this section. The responses of two female principals and three male principals to questions (collected through a questionnaire) were gathered in order to construct the principals' experiences of democratic participation in their schools. Questionnaires were personally taken to schools to be administered to the principals. Unstructured open-ended questions were preferred as they allow the respondents freedom with regard to how they wish to respond, and as a result they provided me with very rich data that would not have been gained by means of structured (closed) questions. Another reason why I included such questions was that they are useful if attitudes, perceptions, and views of individuals are the purpose of the study, as in this case.

I analysed the data using themes. Themes that emerged from the data form the basis of the findings for this article and the analysis was based on governance experiences, participation and communication experiences, as well as decision-making and capacity-building experiences. In the process of data analysis, I tried to retain the voice and the sense of originality. The situated description given below is, in a sense, summary or distillation of meanings conveyed and captured in the themes. These are the central themes, which form the basis for general and situated descriptions of the respondents' experience of the phenomenon. They represent specific thoughts, feelings or perceptions, as expressed by the participants. According to Heath (2000), these are the experiential statements in the participants' own words.

The summary explications from principals' responses (direct quotes in italics) are provided below. There are many commonalities from the data from five principals of schools.

Summary implications and theory linkages for school Principal A

Themes emanating from the data from School A show that there was some form of democratic participation in the school. There were some positive experiences, such as the fact that learners were given their own opportunity to elect their learner representative council (LRC) through a voting system. Furthermore, learners were elected through the teacher liaison officer (TLO), which shows that there was some form of participation going on in the school: "*Learners are elected through the teacher liaison officer.*" Principal A thought that they did not experience any communication problems due to the fact that the mother tongue (Xhosa) and English were both used as languages of communication during the SGB meetings to cater for all the members of school governance.

The principal was of the opinion that every member was therefore able to deliberate and argue when discussions were open. He also believed that learners were given equal access to information just as other stakeholders were,

and he added that they were important members and he thought that they could not be ignored or treated differently as they should have a say in matters that affected their school. *“Yes, because they form part of school governance they cannot be ignored as they play different roles in the handling of school matters for effective and efficient management. If one of them is ignored conflict may occur”* (Principal A). In this sense the school allowed learners to deliberate and argue, there was open communication and learners were given access to information, which showed that there was a link between theory and practice in the school. This is a positive step and relates positively to what I am arguing for (giving voice to the voiceless).

However, negative things could also be extracted from the principal's responses which show that democratic participation was not fully practised in the school: *“Parents sometimes complain that they are children; they do not need to know everything and sometimes parents feel that learners are learners, they should study books”* (Principal A). The fact that learners were elected through the teacher liaison officer could also have negative consequences. The mere presence of an educator who is also an adult could intimidate learners. This shows that they were not free and there was no open freedom of speech for learners.

This point is supported by the fact that those who were elected were warned even before they started participating that they need not raise complaints but that their part was to conform to the rules and regulations stipulated by members of the school governance. Their role was so limited that the learners' voices were unheard: *“The TLO makes them to be fully aware of the fact that those learners who are elected to represent other learners are not there to raise complaints of the dissatisfaction all the time”* (Principal A).

After they had been elected they were further intimidated and excluded by the parents. There was a feeling among parents that learners did not need to be informed of everything that was going on as they were regarded as children. This shows that although the principal said that they did engage and deliberate well, they were not engaged or taken seriously: *“Parents sometimes complain that they are children; they do not need to know everything and sometimes parents feel that learners are learners, they should study books”* (Principal A).

It is obvious that deliberative democracy was lacking in this school. The LRC was not taken seriously as the only roles that were seen to be directly linked to this body were those of preventing crime, fighting and absenteeism and enforcing punctuality, which to my understanding is not part of why they were stakeholders in school governance. Furthermore, they were sometimes left out deliberately or not even invited when some decisions were taken, which shows that decisions were taken without any form of consensus. The following quote confirms this view: *“Not always, it depends. I feel it is not good to invite learners in issues like educator misbehaviour and educator conflicts as these might affect the dignity of the educator towards learners. Some issues should be confidential to the school management team and the parent body of the SGB”* (Principal A).

Summary implications and theory linkages for School B

In School B very little was done to make a positive move towards engaging or involving learners in the structure of governance. What can be applauded is the fact that learners were given freedom with no intimidation during the election of their office bearers. According to the principal, communication flowed smoothly among all members of school governance most of the time, depending on the situation: *“The learners are elected in a democratic way because they are given an opportunity to choose whom they feel will represent them in the school governing body”* (Principal B).

However, in this school learners were not taken seriously. They were excluded and were not seen as equal partners with other stakeholders. They were excluded because of their age and were seen as having no positive contribution to make in the structure of governance: *“The learners are shy to talk in a meeting; maybe this is due to age or they feel insecure”* (Principal B).

The learners' silence was viewed as their major barrier and there was no indication of help to rectify the situation. Educators seemed happy about the fact that the learners were quiet, and simply perceived them as being shy and insecure: *“They are voiceful on issues like sport and social activities. When it comes to educational related issues they seem passive”* (Principal B). Stakeholders did not trust each other. I believe that where there is no trust there will not be any progress, as in such a situation each stakeholder is trying to protect him/herself from the others.

Principal B herself did not feel comfortable in the presence of learners and did not fully support them: *“When there are critical issues, irregularities on the teacher's side, the parent component is reluctant to involve learner component nursing their insecurity or lack of technical handling of the matter [of] concern”* (Principal B). Even when they tried to raise some points their input was not accepted. In this school, learner democratic participation was not regarded as valuable. There was evidence of much injustice in the school and deliberation was far from being ideal.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School C

School C was similar to Schools A and B. The principal of School C believed that learner participation was a good idea but said that he was being hindered in his endeavours by other stakeholders who did not take kindly to learners: *“Parents and teachers are treated equally but it's not always the case with learners, not always because some decisions are taken without them”* (Principal C).

There was no engagement of learners at all. Their involvement depended on the subject matter for that particular day: *“Sometimes they do but it always depends on the subject matter”* (Principal C). Moreover, learners' freedom was being compromised by educators and they were not given equal access to information (as it was to other members of school governance). Age exclusion dominated school governance. Although inclusion is of paramount importance in school governance it was lacking in this school and there was no sign of democratic participation.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School D

There was evidence of positive elements for democratic participation in School D. Learners were given opportunities to participate, albeit on a limited scale: *“When actual decisions are to be taken they do not vote but conduct proper consultation and hearings, but the principal concludes this sentence by saying ‘if needs be’”* (Principal D). There were signs of inclusion, and learners’ voices were taken into consideration. When asked about the person who actually took decisions in the school governance, the principal’s response was that the chairperson did. However, just as in other schools, in some instances learners were not treated like other stakeholders: *“Well, if the items are not delicate to elders’ behaviour”* (Principal D). This was not a good sign for democratic participation as learners were not being engaged.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School E

Principal E suggested that learners’ voices were not taken into consideration and were not heard in the school. The principal complained that learners were only looking for faults and they liked to criticise. Just as in the other schools, learners did not play a positive role in school governance: *“Some members [of the SGB] go drunk, they insult and behave rudely towards learners, and they lose interest in such meetings”* (Principal E). This was not a good sign. For school governance to be inclusive, all members — including learners — need to be allowed to deliberate, argue and criticise other members, including themselves. Overall, democratic participation was not taking place in practice in this school: *“We involve them because it is a government policy. Sometimes yes, sometimes no, and yes, if reasonable. Children will always be children, we do not say yes to everything they want”* (Principal E).

The analysis of the data shows that, whether consciously or unconsciously, educators who are part of school governance allow cultural and traditional practices to dictate their behaviour and the way they conduct themselves. Judging from the circumstances surrounding the behaviour and responses of educators, it is undoubtedly true that the environment contributes to the failure of democratic participation in schools. To make this point more clearly: in the structure of school governance children are looked upon as minors, and have no legitimate powers. It is worth mentioning that in some black communities children can still not command power or influence and they remain under the guidance and supervision of elders. Such behaviour is being perpetuated by both cultural and traditional values and practices that are dominant in some black communities. What happens in the society is consciously or unconsciously being transferred to the school community. In a sense, the conflict between the personal values of educators and learners and those of other stakeholders is therefore a symptom of the larger problem which was not further investigated in this article because of its focus.

Based on the discussions on the principals’ responses I do suggest deliberative democratic school governance as a strategy for improving the democratic participation of stakeholders in school governance.

Some obstacles to learner participation that have emanated from the data will be discussed next.

Obstacles to learner participation

Problem areas, emerging from the analysis of data gathered from principals of five schools, are as follows:

- There was little evidence of democratic participation in the structure of school governance;
- Deliberation/argument was not practised by school governance stakeholders;
- There was a lack of democratic engagement in the structure of school governance;
- School governance was characterised by a lack of justice on the part of stakeholders; and
- There was a lack of communication among school governance members.

The identification of these problem areas has led to the conclusion that learner voices are being compromised in the structure of school governance. In attempting to resolve the problem, I suggest a new model of democratic school governance, to be known as 'deliberative democratic school governance' (DDSG), which will offer some kind of solution to the school governance problems outlined above. There are several approaches that can be employed in creating learner voices and in taking deliberative democratic school governance forward.

Suggestions

Based on the above findings I suggest the following:

Members of school governance should all work together as a group and not as separate entities. It is clear from the data, in almost all five schools, in one way or another, members of school governance did not pull together. There are many commonalities from the data from five principals of schools that show that school governance members were not working together. I believe that they can work together if everything they do could be,

- inclusive (i.e. no one is excluded from participating in the discussion on topics relevant to her/him, and no relevant information is omitted);
- coercion-free (i.e. everyone engages in arguments freely, without being dominated or feeling intimidated by other participants); and
- open (i.e. each participant can initiate, continue, and question the discussion on any relevant topic, including the formulation of policies and procedures).

When people work together as a group with the aim of achieving a goal, everyone's input is carefully considered and an outcome is crafted that best meets the needs of the group. Additionally, in making decisions it is important to seek consensus when the success of a task depends on co-ordinated action by all. Moreover, people are more likely to understand the implications of the

decision when they have committed themselves publicly to shouldering their parts of the task. For example, when one consents to a decision, one is giving one's permission to the group to go ahead with the decision.

School stakeholders should devise means of listening to one another. Storytelling has long been a valuable strategy in black African communities. Traditional African societies instil desirable attitudes, dispositions and habits in their youngsters through storytelling. A great deal of their philosophical material is embedded in proverbs, myths, folktales, folk-songs, rituals, beliefs, customs, and the traditions of the people. Learners should learn to tell their own stories, as well as to listen to others' stories. In school learners' stories will play a significant role. If teachers, for example, could start with indigenous knowledge systems which provide the framework for their learners' initial experiences, then learners would be encouraged to draw on their cultural practices and daily experiences as they negotiate new situations. Therefore, all stakeholders in South African schools should be encouraged to broaden their cultural way of life, namely, the culture of story telling.

Concluding remarks

While democracy is the cornerstone of the new South Africa, it will however remain nothing more than that unless stakeholders inculcate a day-to-day behaviour which supports a truly democratic society. When all stakeholders see that the schools are serving their purpose, they tend to take ownership of 'their' schools, and when schools have an active and explicit mandate from the public, they are more likely to be orderly and excellent. My belief is that one of the best places to give democracy true meaning is in a democratic school environment. It should provide all its stakeholders with an opportunity to learn about good communication, mediation and conflict-reducing techniques, tolerance, and civic responsibility. It should also be a place where the effects of these values can be seen.

In the case of stakeholders such as educators and learners, deliberative democratic school governance will help to change their mindset and help them to think constructively. Democracy demands that differences be confronted and talked through; they cannot simply be ignored or blamed on a remote hierarchy. In this study, the majority of problems in the schools arise from an almost complete lack of knowledge or experience among both educators and learners on how to negotiate, how to disagree politely, and how to develop the changing relationships between them.

In view of the above findings and suggestions, I suggest that for the benefit of all stakeholders, deliberative democratic school governance needs to be adopted in schools.

References

- Arendt H 1968. *Men in Dark Times*. Harcourt Brace & World.
- Babbie E 2001. A phenomenological study of thinking. In: Giorgi A, Barton A & Maes C (eds). *Duquesne studies in phenomenological psychology*. Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press.

- Benhabib S (ed.) 1996. *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.
- Brink H 1996. *Fundamentals of Research methodology for Health Care Professionals*. Cape Town: Juta & Company Ltd.
- Chinsamy D 1995. An investigation into the potential role of students in decision-making in the management and administration of secondary schools: A case study. MEd dissertation. Grahamstown: Rhodes University.
- Field PA & Morse JM 1985. *Nursing Research: The Application of Qualitative Approaches*. London: Croom Helm.
- Fletcher A 2003. Help Us Help Ourselves: Creating Supportive Learning Environments with Students. *I-Cubed E-Zine*, April 2002. Available at <http://Freechild.org/CMSI/Article.100.htm>. Accessed 14 June 2006.
- Guttman A & Thompson D 1999. Democratic Disagreement. In: Macedo S (ed.). *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Habermas J 1996. *Between Facts and Norms: Contributions to a Discourse Theory of Law and Democracy*. Trans. William Rehg. Cambridge MA: MIT Press.
- Heath PR 2000. The PK Zone: A phenomenological study. *Journal of parapsychology*, 64:53-72.
- Mabovula NN 2008. A philosophical exploration of democratic participation in school governance in selected South African black schools in the Eastern Cape Province. PhD thesis. Stellenbosch: Stellenbosch University.
- Makubu TS 1993. The role of Parent-Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs) in the Democratic Governance of Schools: Future Policy Implications. MEd dissertation. Cape Town: University of Cape Town.
- Mathebula PT 2001. The National Department's Guides for Representative Councils of Learnership: A critical discussion of the implications for democratic citizenship education: Unpublished MEd thesis. Johannesburg: University of the Witwatersrand.
- Nkwinti FSN 2001. An Assessment of the Implications of Including Learners in School Governing Bodies: A Case Study of Four High Schools in the Grahamstown District, Eastern Cape Province. MEd dissertation. Alice: University of Fort Hare.
- Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996. *South African Schools Act*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- Robson C 1999. *Real World Research: A Resource for Social Scientists & Practitioner-Researchers*. London: Blackwell.
- Roederer C & Moellendorf D 2004. *Jurisprudence*. Lansdowne: Juta & Company Ltd.
- Sithole S 1995. *The Participation of students in Democratic School Governance, in Democratic Governance of Public Schooling in South Africa*. Durban: The Education Policy Unit.
- Sithole S 1998. Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs): Present State and Future Prospects, 1st edn. (1994, in Education Policy Unit, NATAL), Democratic Governance of Public Schooling in South Africa, A record of research and advocacy from the Education Policy Unit. Natal, Durban. *EPU NATAL*, 39-49.
- Young IM 1990. *Justice and the Politics of Difference*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.
- Young IM 1996. Communication and the Other: Beyond Democracy. In: Seyla Benhabib (ed.). *Democracy and Difference: Contesting the Boundaries of the Political*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press.

- Young IM 1999. Justice, Inclusion & Deliberative Democracy. In: Stephen Macedo (ed.). *Deliberative Politics: Essays on Democracy and Disagreement*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- Young IM 2000. *Inclusion and Democracy*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Author

Nonceba Mabovula is Lecturer in the Department of Educational Foundations at the Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha Campus. She is responsible for educational management, educational philosophy, supervision of postgraduate research, and gender studies.

