Learner councillors' perspectives on learner participation

Edith Phaswana
ephaswana@uj.ac.za

Learner participation in South Africa was legislated in 1996 through the South African Schools Act, No. 84. Since then it has been a legal requirement to establish representative councils of learners (RCL) at secondary schools (with Grade 8 and higher) countrywide. I investigate the perspectives and experiences of participation with secondary schools learners elected to serve in representative councils of learners and school governing bodies. I adopted an interpretive qualitative methodology. In-depth interviews and focus groups were used. Three categories of experiences emerged: (1) learning experiences, (2) relational experiences, and (3) challenges faced by learner councillors. The data further suggest that there is an opportunity for learners to gain skills that could be useful for them. I offer a framework for learner participation that is grounded in social learning to promote meaningful participation.

Keywords: learner councillors; learner participation; Limpopo; representative council of learners; South African Schools Act

Introduction

Learner participation in South Africa was legislated in 1996 through the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996). This legislation requires schools with Grade 8 or higher to elect a representative council of learners (RCL). The impetus for including learners as stakeholders in school decision making emanates from the worldwide movement for increased youth participation in settings in which young people find themselves on a daily basis (Article 12 of the UN Convention on the Right of the Child, 1989). However, in the South African context, there is a general conviction that secondary school learners have earned a right to be heard through their having participated in the liberation of the country (see Carr, 2005; Nongubo, 2004; Carr & Williams, 2009; Mncube 2008). Learner participation in this context refers to 'adults working with learners to develop ways of ensuring their views are heard and valued' (DfES, 2004:87). This may include learners' involvement in school decision making bodies. Learner councillor is used in this paper to describe those learners elected to serve in the RCLs and/or in school governing bodies (SGBs).

Previous studies on learner participation highlighted both personal and institutional benefits (Mncube, 2008/9; Wilson, 2009; Carr, 2005; Mabovula, 2009). Learners who participate benefit from a sense of personal control, increased confidence, and improved relationships with teachers and peers (Wilson, 2009). Other benefits include improved functioning of the school, and the promotion of democratic values (Mncube, 2007/8). Participation also broadens learners' insight, improves practical reasoning skills, and promotes a greater understanding of school values (Markham & Aveyard, 2003, in

Wilson, 2009). Moreover, participation is associated with higher educational expectations, positive self-concept, and greater academic commitment among young people (Quane & Rankin, 2006).

In recent years, the theory and practice of learner participation in South Africa has been widely debated (see for example Nongubo, 2004; Carr, 2005; Carr & Williams, 2005; Mncube, 2008; 2009; Mabovula, 2009). It is important to first highlight issues of legislation and policy. Firstly, there are tensions between protection and participation in the legislative framework. It is noted that the RCL member in the SGB may not be in office for more than one year (RSA, 1996). This seems problematic as other actors (parents, non-teaching staff, teachers) are accorded a relatively longer term of office in the SGB. Learners, due to their limited experience in decision making, are the ones who need to familiarise themselves with proceedings in the SGB before they can actually assume an active role. Therefore, putting learners in the SGB for only one year suggests that learners are not taken seriously as equal partners with other stakeholders. Secondly, Section 32 of the Act states: 'learner governors may not contract on behalf of the school nor vote on resolutions of a governing body that can impose liabilities on third parties or on the school'. This has been subject to misinterpretations at the ground level. In their research, Bischoff and Phakoa (1999) found that learners were prohibited from discussing financial matters unless they were 21 years of age. This appears to be problematic considering that most learners finish high school at the age of 18. In reality, this means that they may not have the opportunity to deal with financial matters during their tenure as RCL members. There is nothing wrong in protecting learners from incidents that can impose liabilities on their part, as this may have serious implications. For instance, learners may be cynical about participation in the future. However, excluding learners from taking part in certain discussions is also likely to raise suspicions among them.

Thirdly, there are problems noted with the RCL guides. By law, Article 11.2 urges the Member of Executive Council (MEC) to publish functions and procedures for establishing RCLs at schools. This has been done in the form of RCL guides distributed in all provinces. Some scholars have criticised these guides, particularly for the tone of language used. For instance, Nongubo (2004) argues that the guides position learners as potential threats who need to be treated with caution. Consequently, their participation is limited and conditional, as the RCL is expected to liaise on behalf of other learners. The RCL guide states that "the principal must explain reasons for decisions taken to the RCL, who in turn must inform its constituency" (DoE, 1999:14). This further indicates that RCLs are seen as instruments for communicating messages to their peers rather than as equal partners who contribute to decisions. The practical difficulties of learner participation have also been outlined. Recent research highlights low level of trust in the RCL as compared to prefects, lack of financial and infrastructural support for schools, and lack of proper channels of communications with teachers, SGBs and learners (Carr

& Williams, 2009). Some principals were reluctant to recognise the RCL as the only legitimate student body at school level. By so doing, as Carr and Williams (2009) argue, the schools were actually contravening the law.

There is increasing evidence that points to adult governors in the SGB as obstacles to learner participation. Parents, especially in rural schools, were reluctant to enter into discussions with minors during SGB meetings (Mncube, 2008; Mabovula, 2009). This type of reluctance is to be expected as learner participation challenges traditional adult-child relationships in this context. Furthermore, it points to negative perceptions of young people prevalent in South African society. As Mabovula (2009) contends, the traditional notion of being young in this context dictates conduct during SGB meetings. Clearly, this can have detrimental implications for learners.

Gender and power relations also limit learner participation. Mncube's (2008:78) work in Kwazulu Natal (KZN) highlighted that school governing bodies exacerbate inequalities of power relations, race, gender and socio-economic class. For example, girls were willing to relinquish their decision making powers to boys (Mncube, 2009). This was also observed between adult governors of different gender (see Mncube, 2008). Unequal gender relations are a common occurrence in South African society (Mncube, 2009; Moses, 2009). In contrast, results from England indicate that female learners are more engaged in discussion than their male counterparts (Wilson, 2009). Power is also biased to staff to the extent that teachers formulate the code of conduct on behalf of learners (Mncube, 2008). This clearly contravenes the Act which assigns this responsibility to the SGB. As Mncube (2008) observes, parents and learners in rural schools are generally passive in SGB proceedings. In such contexts, parent governors are willing to delegate their functions to the principal with the belief that he/she is more knowledgeable in educational matters (Mncube, 2008).

International researchers further highlight limitations to participation by learners. Bragg (2007a) contends that learner participation due to its demand on teachers' time can strain relations at schools. Some authors assert that most schools in their nature value hierarchies and exclusions (Cockburn, 2006; Bragg, 2007b). Cockburn (2006) argues that school principals control both agenda and processes. Based on his research in England, Cockburn (2006) concluded that the school as a sphere of participation does not encourage young people to challenge structures of authority around them. Consequently, learners always find themselves at the periphery when decisions are made, even if they are part of these committees. Young (2000) describes this form of exclusion as 'internal exclusion' which she describes as a situation where people are included in forums but their views are dismissed as out of order, simply because interaction privileges specific style of expression. The above literature coupled with personal observations provided a basis for this paper.

My purpose in this paper is to contribute to a process of theorising learner participation. I do this by providing empirical evidence of the subjective view-

points of learner councillors with regard to their experiences of learner participation. I intend to conceptualise learner participation using a social learning approach, in particular the work of Wildermeersch, Jansen, Vanderbeele and Jans (1998), as discussed next.

Theoretical framework: social learning approach

The work of Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998) on social learning in group contexts provided a theoretical framework for this study. Given the widespread limitations of the theory and practice of learner participation, one explores the experiences of elected learners in order to promote meaningful participation at a school level. Although this theory has been developed in relation to adults' processes in participatory systems, it can be relevant to understand crucial relations between adults and learners in school governance. The theory recognises that people can learn through interactions with others. Social learning, as Lave and Wenger (1991) would also argue, is mediated by different perspectives of co-participants.

According to Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998), social learning takes place when people strike a balance between different tensions that influence decisions and directions of the learning system. In their opinion, social learning is explained in terms of four basic concepts: *action, reflection, communication* and *co-operation* (Wildermeersch *et al.*, 1998). Arguably, participation in school governance is a learning experience for both adults and learners. They maintain that creating dialogue using these principles can be helpful in promoting meaningful participation. Social learning has been found to be appropriate in dealing with challenging circumstances such as crucial interactions between adults and young people in participatory systems (Percy-Smith, 2006). Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998) recommend the use of a group's maximum potential to respond to uncertainties.

The first dimension that enables social learning is *action*. According to Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998), actors engage in action because they realise a particular need, desire, shortage or challenge. Actors here could be the different stakeholders in school governance, namely learners, parents, teachers and non-teaching staff. Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998) claim people use a variety of resources such as knowledge, competencies, insight, money, patience and other things to overcome the discrepancy between need and competence. In cases where one group lacks certain resource, others are able to compensate. It is possible for adult governors to have limited knowledge on a particular learner issue and resort to seek the perspectives of learners. Thus, participatory competencies are gained as actors interact within their context.

The second dimension of social learning is *reflection*. Reflection, according to Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998), entails the ability to stand back from the action and consider how strategies and resources contributed towards the results. In social learning shared meanings are created out of diverse identities. An opportunity for social learning can be missed when actors fail to distance themselves from their pre-held assumptions about each other. For

instance, if adult governors perceive learners as 'problems', they may not include them in decision making and thus fail to learn from their experiences. However, when adults and learners form a common identity out of diverse perspectives, social learning is enabled (Wildermeersch *et al.*, 1998).

Communication is the third important element of social learning and has the potential to trigger or inhibit learning. Social learning recommends that during discussions diversity of inputs be sought from both experts (adult governors) and novices (learner governors) to promote reflexive learning. In most cases, as Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998) argue, experts tend to ignore the competencies of novices due to their reliance on their own competencies. Mncube (2008) and Mabovula's (2009) work illustrated that often adult governors rely on their expertise and disregard the perspectives of learners. This leads to a unilateral control and can potentially limit social learning.

The final dimension of social learning is *co-operation*. In order to achieve goals in participatory systems, people find themselves in a process of negotiation (Wildermeersch *et al.*, 1998). During these negotiations difference in perceptions and interpretations are unavoidable. Opportunities for social learning are influenced by the groups' ability to reflect and detach themselves from their orientations and beliefs. In Wildermeersch *et al.*'s (1998) terms, social learning is enabled when we allow debates to take place because they point to deep-rooted problems. The authors advise that where conflict arises it should be used as an opportunity for constructive collaboration. Wildermeersch and colleagues (1998) acknowledge that at times differences may not result in an effective solution and in such cases majority rule or power mechanisms can be viable options.

Overall, the four dimensions of social learning offer some insights in relation to learner participation. However, as Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998) argue, social learning cannot happen without the influence of other factors such as the role different actors assume in these systems, issues of power, responsibility and creativity. They distinguish between four roles of actors: *facilitator*, *core actor*, *go-between* and *obstructionist*. In terms of learner participation, these roles can be paralleled with the role of adults. According to Wildermeersch *et al.* (1998), the *facilitator* allows others to bring in new perspectives to the system. This can be equated with adults who value and respect the inputs and contributions of learners. These adults would seek views from learners in making decisions because they realise that goals may not be achieved in the absence of a learner perspective. In contrast to the facilitator, the *obstructionist* prevents new perspectives from becoming more articulate and in doing so privileges existing reality. This can be adults who restrict learners from expressing their views or even disregard the inputs made by learners in decision making. The third role is the go-between. Actors who take up this role find themselves in diverse networks linking contradictory perspectives with ongoing ones. One might think of sympathetic adults who are connected to different youth groups and who commit themselves to assisting young people while belonging to an adult group. The last role is the *core actor* who is influential in initiating and continuing dominant definitions of reality

and interaction patterns. Core actors could be adults who believe that their ideas are superior to those of learners and deliberately ignore learners' inputs.

Wildermeersch and colleagues (1998) argue that when challenges set in, in most cases different actors develop creative answers to cope with them. By so doing, the actors inevitably face *issues of power* and *responsibility*. In social learning actors have different capacities to act, owing to the sets of social and organisational relationships they represent in interaction — these differences affect each dimension of social learning. At school, adults are in a position of authority. Depending on how they use this powerful position, their actions may affect learners' intentions to take action, reflect, communicate and co-operate in these contexts — thus prohibiting or promoting social learning. In social learning, power is neither taken away nor given but is constantly negotiated. Social learning can contribute to empowering others on condition that it confronts issues of power and exclusion. If Wildermeersch *et al.*'s (1998) ideas could be accepted in theorising learner participation in school governance, learner participation would complement more formal approaches to learning.

Research problem
For a long time research focusing on learner participation tended to empha-sise principles of democracy to assess progress in participatory systems. This study takes a different stance by linking learner participation with a social learning approach to take this research agenda forward. In this paper I set out to investigate learners' perspectives and experiences of participation in four secondary schools in the Limpopo province. My own doctoral study that investigated the participation experiences of young people in three selected settings (schools, municipality and youth organisation) in Limpopo province revealed that learner participation at secondary schools is fraught with practical difficulties (Phaswana, 2008). This was corroborated by an examina-tion of literature on learner participation that suggested the complexities in the implementation of RCL policies and school governance (Sithole, 1995; Bishoff & Phakoa, 1999; Harber & Trafford, 1999; Heystek, 2001/4; Nongubo, 2004; Carr, 2005; Mncube, 2008/9; Carr & Williams, 2009; Mabovula, 2009). Based on this background, learner participation was therefore chosen as an area of focus due to perceived vulnerability of their status within the SGB. The aim was to understand the depth of their experiences through methods that 'allow conversation' and 'expression of words' (Barber & Naulty, 2005). Writing about the dearth of research that privileges the voices of learners in the RCL, Nongubo (2004) alludes to the challenge of researching 'troublemakers' as learners' councils in South African schools (black schools in particular) have been perceived as such.

Research design
Research paradigm
The purpose in this research was to capture, analyse, interpret, and under-

stand the experiences of learners, using their own statements. Therefore a qualitative interpretative methodology was seen as appropriate to capture detailed subjective viewpoints of participants (Snape & Spencer, 2003). The notion that respondents have their own unique way of defining the world is significant here (Denzin, 1970). While qualitative studies are often criticised for their lack of generalisability given their small samples, it is argued here that a qualitative approach can be 'useful in highlighting the existence of certain phenomena' (Van Maanen, 1998 in Kelliher, 2005:123). The perspectives represented here certainly do not represent those of learners in Limpopo nor the sub-district studied but rather those who participated in the study. It is hoped that their experiences can shed some light about a learner councillor's perspective and understanding of participation practices in the RCL.

Sample and its description

A sample of four secondary schools was obtained from one sub-district of the Limpopo Province. Purposive sampling, a feature of qualitative research, allows researchers to identify characteristics of interest in advance (Hammersley & Atkins, 1995). The schools were chosen deliberately to portray particular features of interest (Ritchie, Lewis & Elam, 2003), namely, (1) espousing learner participation, and (2) having an elected RCL at the time of the research. Due to the fact that many schools met the criteria, a maximum variation sampling technique was employed (Patton, 2002). The variations for constructing a sample population of schools were enrolment, school type, ownership, location and community background. The process of mapping diversity of schools was discussed with the district manager who had knowledge about the different types of schools in the sub-district. For reasons of confidentiality, he was not informed which schools were finally selected. It was hoped that diversifying the sample would increase the chances of capturing the nuances that might exist within the schools, or in particular of the RCLs (Patton, 2002).

The schools are described in some detail to provide insight into the context of each one of them.

School 1 (S1) is a state-owned, ethnically homogeneous school with an intake of 1,229 learners. The school is situated in a small township. The neighbouring community is mainly black Africans with the majority speaking Sepedi as a first language. The neighbourhood comprises built township houses, and some informal settlements at the periphery of the township. The RCL was first elected in 1997 following the legislation of SASA (1996). Prior to that, learners would elect a student representative council (SRC) every year although it remained unrecognised. The majority of learners in the RCL are affiliated to the Congress of South African Students (COSAS). According to the SMT, the establishment of the RCL was well received by the parents weary of school protests at the school. The RCL consists of ten members, most of whom were in Grade 12. Three members, in particular the chairperson, treasurer and the secretary of the RCL, are deployed to participate in the SGB.

Learners have developed their own constitution covering topics such as disciplinary procedures, code of conduct, uniform, punctuality and class attendance. A staff member is elected by teachers to serve as a liaison between teachers, SMT and the learners.

School 2 (S2) is a state-owned secondary school located in a black rural community. The learners are mainly black Africans and all speak Sepedi. A total of 1,345 learners were registered with the school at the time of this research. The RCL was first set up in 1997 in line with SASA (1996) following years of lack of recognition of elected SRCs. The RCL had seven members, two of whom were elected to represent learners in the SGB. One teacher is also nominated to liaise between the RCL and the SMT.

School 3 (S3) is a former model C secondary school situated in an affluent area of the town. Both the neighbourhood and the school are racially mixed. The school has 1,123 learners. The RCL at S3 was established in 2000, as a result of government intervention to ensure compliance with SASA (1996). Prior to the establishment of the RCL, the prefect body was the only recognised representative body of learners. Both the prefect system and the RCL were in operation at the time of research. The two bodies are elected annually although serving different roles. The RCL is made up of grade representatives whereas the prefect body is formed by class representatives. The prefects attend to the day-to-day classroom issues between teachers and students, whereas the RCL is responsible for school wide issues. Two Grade 12 members of the RCL are inevitably members of the SGB. This is against the law which requires the learners to elect their SGB representatives. A teacher is appointed by the principal to oversee the RCL

School 4 (S4) is a privately-owned independent school founded in 1995 situated in the same neighbourhood as S3. This school has a boarding facility and has a roll of 2,230. The majority of learners are black from middle class backgrounds all over the province. Prior to 2003, S4 employed a different mode of learner participation to state schools. However, since 2003 the school has adopted the RCL policy although there is no learner representation in the SGB. According to the contact teacher at S4, the RCL was favoured because it gives learners an opportunity to have a say in matters that affect them as guided by SASA (1996). The RCL is made up of 30 representatives and is elected annually by learners from each class.

Methods of data collection
Data collection involved three phases. The first phase involved gathering school-produced documents such as school policy, the RCL constitution, and SGB constitution to obtain contextual information. During this time, the teacher liaison officer (TLO) was also interviewed for clarification and augmentation of documents. The second phase included in-depth, individual, face-to-face interviews with RCL learners. Seidman (2006) contends that in-depth interviews enable the researcher to obtain detailed and in-depth information upon which people's perceptions are built. During the third phase, four focus group discussions (6–8 participants each) were conducted with learners from

the four selected schools. The purpose here was to enable debate among participants considering that people's perceptions differ in both public and private arena. The groups were designed to be heterogeneous in composition. Each group had a mix of a gender, age and school type. The idea for mixing participants was to obtain an unbiased view during discussions.

An interview guide was designed for the purpose of data collection. Mertens (1998) advises that researchers preparing interview guides should know the local language, share the purpose of the interview, and also pre-test interview procedures. In compliance with these recommendations, the research was conducted at a place where language was not a barrier for the researcher, though most respondents preferred English to their mother tongue. Briefing sessions were held with members of the RCLs and TLOs at schools to share the purpose of the study. An information leaflet regarding learner's roles in the research was also left with participants for future reference. The interview guide was tested at two neighbouring schools. This guide was modified and used for data collection.

In each school, the chairperson and the secretary of the RCL were interviewed individually and others participated in focus groups. I deliberately ensured that I included both RCL representatives and learner governors in my sample. This was done in order to gain a clear perspective from both 'involved' and 'uninvolved' learners in the SGB.

Ethical issues

Ethical approval was sought through my university's ethics committee prior to fieldwork. Crow, Wiles, Heath and Charles (2006:83) categorise young people as research participants within the 'vulnerable' groups 'because of their perceived openness to coercion, exploitation or harm by more powerful others'. For such reasons, the issue of informed consent was particularly important in this study. A brief personal biography in relation to the context of the study, an explanation of the study purpose, assurance in relation to confidentiality and anonymity, provision of written consent, and the right to withdraw were discussed with the RCLs and TLOs. These were also stated on the information leaflet provided to participants. A week was allowed before these consent forms were collected from participants to avoid haphazard recruitment which could potentially have affected the quality of data to be produced (Crow *et al.*, 2006).

Both individual and focus group data were recorded using a digital voice recorder and were later transcribed for analysis. The majority of participants opted to speak English during the interviews with the exception of two participants from rural and township schools whose interviews were translated. To protect identity, codes were developed for both institutions and participants. The same codes were also used in audio files and transcripts.

Data analysis

Computer-assisted qualitative data analysis software called Nudist (N6) was used to manage the process of data analysis. Whilst the software is known for

its efficiency in data management, it did not ease the exhaustive process of thinking about what codes to assign and categories to form. Two approaches were used to analyse these data: a 'top-down' and a 'bottom-up' approach (Nilsen, 2005:118). According to Nilsen (2005), in the former the researcher applies existing categories to the data, whereas the latter involves the analyst generating categories grounded in the data. Categories of biographical information of participants were already created, and my role was to allocate relevant data into these categories. The 'bottom-up' approach involved a more complex process than the 'top-down' approach, as it involved reading through each transcript to get a sense of meaning. In this process, I was labelling data segments as 'free nodes' as they came to mind. Data sets that belong together were re-read and grouped to form 'tree nodes' (categories). These categories were formed by correlating focus group data with interview data. As relationships between categories emerged, higher level categories (themes) were also formed, and this formed the basis of the findings discussed here. Memos of reflections were also created to contextualise the data. Direct quotes from participants are provided in the findings section to augment both descriptive and explanatory accounts made.

Ensuring rigour

In order to ensure rigour the research used two measures: *triangulation* and *audit trail*. A strategy known as *within-method triangulation* was adopted. This involves taking one method and employing multiple strategies within that method to examine the data (Denzin, 1970). In this study, two interview techniques were used to explore experiences of participation at an individual and group level. People's perceptions tend to differ at individual and group level and the reason could be due to listening to others' perspectives during group discussions. A second method used to ensure rigour was the audit trail. Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the main purpose of an audit trail in qualitative research is to enable the auditor to trace data sets to their original sources, so as to enable the auditor to ensure whether the findings are grounded in data. This was also useful for the researcher as it was possible to trace the unusual findings back to transcripts to enable further interpretations.

Research findings and discussion

Learning experiences

Acquisition of skills

All of the learners interviewed reported that there was an opportunity to learn new skills in the RCL. It should be noted that these skills are inferred from learners' assertions and have not been measured against any standards. Skills mentioned include leadership, negotiation, communication, and conflict management skills. One participant summed it up: "*I learnt how to communicate on the table. And I learnt how to communicate with mob if the students are angry what can I do to turn things right*" (Focus group discussion). Similar findings have emerged in Checkoway *et al.*'s (2003) study in the US where young people displayed high levels of communicative competencies gained

during participation. These authors noted that young people were learning to hold multilingual mass meetings, protest school conditions, testify in public and to confront school officials. This finding resonates with Wildermeersch *et al.*'s (1998) idea that in cases where one group lacks certain resources others are able to compensate for it. Participatory competencies are acquired as learners interact with their context.

Taking others' perspectives
Participants also mentioned that they learnt that the art of decision making lies in the ability to consider multiple perspectives: "*I have learnt that when decisions are taken we as young people need to realise that other views are important. We should not think that adults are all out to make our lives difficult. We need to listen to their side of the story*" (Interview, male participant, S2). A willingness to accept the perspectives of others is one of the key components of the communication dimension of social learning (Wildermeersch *et al.*, 1998). In addition to the interviews, focus group participants confirmed this finding and highlighted the danger of not listening to the perspectives of adult governors. For example, two participants from S1 cited an instance where their school was vandalised as a result of learners insisting that a social event be held in the evening against adults' wishes. Their ability to recognise that the views of others should be taken into account signifies an important learning curve. Similar findings have emerged in Koller's (2006) study of student trustees in Canada. She found that student trustees were moving beyond their 'egocentric' ways of relying on their own viewpoints to taking into account the perspectives of others. Young (2000) also notes that during public discussion, participants should not only express their views but also show a willingness to listen to, and learn from others.

Making new relationships
Participation in the RCL offered learners a chance to build new relationships with other members of the school community. This participant confirms: "*I'm very happy that I formed relationships with different people in the school. I'm in the office everyday for a different reason. The ladies in the office, we get on very well and I know everything about their names, we get to talk about almost anything*" (Interview, female participant, S4). This is corroborated by Wilson (2009) who confirmed improved relationships as one of the beneficial outcomes of learner participation. This finding validates Milburn, Rowlands, Stephen, Woodhouse and Sneider's (2003) idea that the ability to make close relationships is one of the competences relevant to social and emotional development of young people.

Transformation of behaviour
The majority of learners reported that there was an opportunity for one's behaviour to be transformed as a result of this participation. A considerable number of male participants indicated that, prior to this role, their behaviours were inappropriate; however, through engagement they improved: "*Since I was*

in the LRC (localised acronym for RCL), I stopped misbehaving here at school. In the past you find people fighting or even myself involved in those fights in class or even talking to a teacher in a rude manner" (Interview, male participant, S1). This participant further suggests that he was motivated by a need to serve as a role model for his peers: "*But now I just want to be exemplary to other learners*" (Interview, male participant, S1). Others mentioned the benefits they accrued by being in the RCL: their school attendance improved and they also gained respect from their peers. What was interesting here is that these comments only emerged during individual interviews. Perhaps it was inappropriate to express them within a group context. The link between participation and behaviour change is made by Koller (2006) who found that student leaders were beginning to change their attitude and behaviour to increase their power in decision making at the school. Piran (2005) also highlighted that Iranian parents whose children were involved in school leadership observed changes in terms of discipline and determination. From this, we can infer that participation in the school council is likely to foster positive conduct among learners. The findings outlined above indicate that there is potential for social learning to take place within the RCL and SGB. Learners acquired skills that could be useful for their personal development, although this was too small a study to draw any firm conclusions. Nonetheless, participants felt they had benefited from participation.

Relational experiences
Preferential treatment
A recurring factor that emerged from the interviews was that teachers preferred learner councillors in comparison to other learners in the school, and this was attributed to their special status: "*We have a different relationship with the teachers than other students do, teachers invite us, we are the teachers' favourite … we just understand. They can see the leadership potential in us*" (Focus group discussion). This was corroborated by individual accounts. This privileged position also enabled them to access spaces other pupils would not be permitted. To cite an example, one participant mentioned that once teachers noticed her badge (RCL badge) she was allowed to enter the staff room and the principal's office. Preferential treatment lies at the heart of teacher-learner relationships at schools. At schools, some learners may be favoured because of their academic abilities, social class, or positive behaviour. From the perspectives of these participants, it appears that leadership position would add to these seemingly unfair practices at schools.

Exclusion from 'teacher-related' matters
There were concerns from those who took part in SGB meetings that on many occasions they were excluded when 'teacher-related' matters were discussed, although their opinions regarding this exclusion diverged. Interestingly, their views differed according to school type. On the one hand, participants from former model C (S3) and independent schools (S4) preferred to be excluded from 'teacher-related matters' as they thought it would be burdensome. To

illustrate I draw on comments from one of the focus groups : "*So I don't think it's necessary for us to get involved in all these* [teacher-related matters] *issues that are gonna put a burden on us. We're just there to bridge the gap and help where we are needed you know*" (Focus group discussion). Individual interviews also highlighted this viewpoint: One participant felt teachers' matters were beyond their remit. On the other hand, participants from the township school (S1) were against being excluded from 'teacher-related matters', arguing that they had equal rights as all other members of the SGB in discussing matters: A male participant argued in the focus group:"*So once they are saying there are certain things which are teacher-related and so on, and because this thing is there and its existing in other schools, to say they give you an opportunity as LRC to attend the SGB meeting but when coming to issues of eh teachers, maybe, say there's a teacher charged with misconduct and so on, they exclude you for five minutes or two minutes and you will come back and then they discuss, whereas, the agenda is there. I mean it is wrong that thing, you are part of the SGB, you see, I would like to differ a little bit with* (name one participant) *to say there are teacher-related issues, you are forming part of the SGB you must be aware. I just want to clarify that*" (Focus group discussion).

Several authors attempt to explain reasons why young people are often excluded in certain topics during participation. Mncube's (2008) study on learner participation demonstrated that even where learners are afforded an opportunity to be involved in participatory forums, they are at times excluded when crucial decisions are to be made. Stafford, Laybourn, and Hill (2003) maintain that youth prefer engaging in other youthful activities to contribute to decisions. Young people's exclusion from many discussions may be partly influenced by the notion that they are inadequately skilled for this (Weller, 2007). Sometime adults feel uncomfortable that their decision making powers would be reduced (Barcelo, 2005). Research by Bischoff and Phakoa (1999) in South Africa warned that inconsistencies in implementing the Act (SASA 1996) may lead youth to feel that they are being misused. In their research, young people complained that it was inappropriate to include them in structures that deny them a voice in certain issues. It would suffice to suggest the role adults assume in this case is that of obstructionist (discussed earlier), that is, they privilege existing forms of reality and prevent new perspectives from becoming articulate (Wildermeersch *et al.*, 1998). This finding may also suggest that adult governors fail to distance themselves from their pre-held assumptions about young people. For instance the notion that youth are immature to contribute to decisions. In this manner social learning is limited. Adult governors should recognise that, despite their different perspectives, learner governors are part of the SGB and therefore should not be excluded in certain discussions.

The use of English, as a language of communication during meetings, was also pointed out as a form of exclusionary practice in the SGB. Participants indicated that these was observed in confrontational situations: "*The problem is if you are telling them the truth about something they are doing wrong they will use this rule like hey English, point of order, and you see everyone will just*

agree '*yes, point of order, point of order .... use English' you see*?" (Focus group discussion). It should be noted that this was ironic, considering that in the present study participants preferred to be interviewed in English despite an option to choose their mother tongue. The learner councillors felt that often teachers, realising that most learners can be very articulate in local languages and thus challenge their authority during meetings, would resort to the use of English in SGB meetings. In this case their poor English skills become an advantage to the teachers, preventing learners from articulating their views properly. In Mabovula's (2009) work, learners were able to deliberate and argue on issues in cases where mother tongue was used. As the present study relied on reported experiences, I am unable to infer that the English language was used to obstruct learners' opinions in this context. However, judging from the perspectives of participants, it would seem so. This is line with Mncube (2009), whose research found that the use of English language in SGB meetings disadvantaged some members of the SGB. Mncube (2008) recommended that learners who participate in the SGB should have a good command of the English to facilitate effective participation in debates.

Leaders' authority challenged
In terms of experiences with fellow learners, the RCL members alleged that the leadership role had some implications, as their authority was often challenged by their peers: "*One thing I don't like being a leader is the disrespect you get from other students. When I'm being sent to give instruction they start to misbehave because they know me. I hate that*" (Focus group discussion). It was discovered through the interview with participants that in some schools (S1 and S2), the RCL members were sometimes expected to assist teachers in enforcing discipline at the school. As a result, peers would attempt to break the rules simply to challenge leader's authority: "*I don't like this thing of thinking that just because you are family or friend the rules will be bent a little bit*" (Interview, male participant, S4). The data also suggest that there were instances where leaders felt uncomfortable to discipline their friends when breaking rules. While some participants felt embarrassed about reprimanding friends, those who did reported that on many occasions their friendships were disrupted: "*For me personally it was dealing with the loss of certain friendships, people I'd known since we were in primary* [school] *together ... And dealing with that is a personal struggle for me*" (Interview, female participant, S3). Liebenberg and Roos' (2008) research on pre-adolescent leaders at primary schools confirm that the current social phenomenon on preadolescent leadership contributes to disrupted peer group interactions. Although some participants showed concern about their friendship ties being interrupted, the majority were determined to bear the loss that comes with this role. The RCL reflected on their experiences and were able to provide insight into the challenging position of being a leader at school. The literature is silent on peer-to-peer relationships in participation, as many studies concentrate on the adult-youth relationships.

Challenges experienced

Competing priorities

It is important to note that the majority of learner councilors found at schools were in Grade 12 except for S3 and S4 where elections involved either class or grade representatives. The Grade 12 participants highlighted the challenge of striking a balance between their academic work and participation activities. As academic achievement is the core rationale for being at school, and often tends to be more demanding during the final year, this heightened leaders' anxieties. Seemingly, the work demand during the matric year affected their participation responsibilities: "*It's almost three years that I have been a leader from grade eight it never challenged me, it only began to challenge me this year. The previous years were okay, now it's getting tough, cause there are lots of preparations to be done... and activities, there are matric dance, cultural days, exams …*" (Focus group discussion). In comparison to their peers, learner councillors' anxiety is accentuated by pressure on achievements, and the desire to impress both teachers and peers. This was also echoed in the interviews: "*…* it (participation) *could be good but in a way bad, they* [peers] *don't get as much work as us, 'cause when you say one there's CASS* [Continuous Assessment], *when you say two this, some teachers say 'you know what I want your work'. It's just that every teacher wants a piece of you and all of them want the best piece, and at the same time students say don't forget that we voted for you*"(Interview, female participant, S4). This finding tallies with that of Valaitis and O'Mara's (2005) study, that there will always be competition for time when doing initiatives at schools, and this suggests the need for strategies to be put in place to avoid participation activities impacting on an RCL member's learning. In their research, Valaitis and O'Mara's (2005) found that non-curricular activities at schools present challenges for teachers and pupils.

Recurring delays

The issue of delays by school management teams (SMT) occurred frequently during the interviews, and was blamed on the lack of commitment to learners' matters, although their expressions seem to further suggest a lack of patience on learner councillors. The RCLs were concerned that the SMTs have a tendency to delay their proposals, and this affected the RCL effectiveness: "*Most of the time they* [school management] *will say the SGB has to come in ... so it takes long ... so it's a process, from us the issue will go to teachers' committee, from teacher' committee to the SGB, no it's not ok*" (Interview, female participant, S2). These accusations could suggest two things; either learners lack patience or adults deliberately delay them because they perceive youth matters as trivial. Whichever the case may be, the RCL members felt they were negatively affected by these delays. In their opinion, they wished they could engage directly with the SGBs rather than through SMTs' approval: "*So if we can cut out this middle man, we can deal directly with the people in the SGB it will be better for us*" (Focus group discussion).

Conclusion

Learner participation is an important element of school governance and needs to be promoted. However, based on the findings I recommend that learners in Grade 12 be exempted from participation activities, since the data suggested that their involvement during this stage is critical for them. I am of the opinion that the reason for giving RCL responsibilities to Grade 12 learners is based on their relatively older age. Such thinking lends itself to deficit theories that associate competence with age (Weller, 2007). Those schools involving learners in disciplinary issues need to be cognisant of the challenges learner councillors face with their peers, as highlighted in the present study.

As the data suggest, learner participation can contribute to social learning. Wildermeerch *et al.*'s (1998) ideas are helpful in thinking about how to make participation meaningful for learners. While recognising the limitation of small studies, a future framework for learner participation is suggested here as way forward. This framework is grounded in social learning theory and the empirical work carried out. First of all, such a framework should be learning-centred, that is, it should articulate clearly the desired learning outcomes that need to be achieved for learners to participate effectively within these structures. In this way there is potential to deepen social learning. This will also benefit learners as well as stakeholders. Second, there is a need for both adult governors and learner governors to distance themselves from their different orientations and beliefs. They should work together to form a common identity which will enable affiliation. Third, during deliberations in meetings, both adult and learner governors need to respect each others' perspectives and refrain from taking each other for granted. In cases where conflicts set in, dialogue must be allowed, as it may signify deep-rooted problems (Percy-Smith, 2006). By allowing debate an opportunity for social learning is created. Fourth, during identification of problems and solutions, both adults' and learners' perspectives must be sought as they are equally valuable. This would enable the two groups to learn from each other's experiences. Finally, in terms of the roles adult governors should assume, the role of 'facilitator' is urged. In other words, during SGB meetings adults should show a willingness to listen to new perspectives and encourage learners to express their views. Teachers in the SGB should take the role of 'go-between' and be willing to mediate contradictory perspectives between parent governors and learner governors.

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Author

Edith Phaswana is a Post-doctoral Fellow in the Department of Anthropology and Development Studies, University of Johannesburg. Her research interests are youth participation in decision-making, children's rights and policy.