

## Democratisation of education in South Africa: issues of social justice and the voice of learners?

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*The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 mandates that secondary school learners, who are members of the Representative Council for Learners, should be part of school governance through participation in school governing bodies. But they are often not afforded a full opportunity to participate in crucial decisions by the adult members of governing bodies, directly or indirectly. I explore the participation of learners in school governance by means of a literature review and empirical investigation using a qualitative approach. The findings are presented in terms of the role of learners in the school governing bodies, learners' involvement in decision making and in curriculum issues, and the role of governing bodies in promoting democracy in the school and in the wider South African society. Findings suggested that spaces should be created for learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs in order to allow them to exercise their right to participation, thus engaging fruitfully in deliberations dealing with school governance. This would in turn lead to social justice and there would be a great potential for their voice to be heard. They would in turn engage fruitfully in dialogues as they felt included in debates and decision-making processes. Silencing the voice of learners, implicitly or explicitly, means that the issues of social justice and democracy are not taken into consideration in SGBs.*

**Keywords:** democracy; education; learners; school governance; social justice

### Introduction

Education worldwide is becoming increasingly accountable to the public and therefore it can be argued that learners should play a role in policy making and implementation, as they constitute a major stakeholder group. Mechanisms to involve learners in the governance of schools are employed globally as a form of democratising education (Carter, Harber & Serf, 2003; Mncube, 2005).

In South Africa, until 1994, the apartheid state excluded the majority of citizens from genuine and equal participation, and it used education to socialise young people into the existing *status quo* of inequalities through conformity to authoritarian structures (Harber & Trafford, 1999). In 1996 the South African democratic state published a White Paper on Organisation and Funding of Schools (Republic of South Africa, 1996) and by this it aimed to foster democratic institutional management, thereby introducing a school governance structure that involves all the stakeholder groups in active and responsible roles in order to encourage tolerance, rational discussion, and collective decision making (Department of Education, 1996:16). From this White Paper emanated the South African Schools Act 1996, which became

operative from the beginning of 1997 and mandated that all public state schools in South Africa must have democratically elected school governing bodies composed of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, and learners. Through this Act it became compulsory for all secondary schools to have a Representative Council for Learners (RCLs), democratically elected by learners at a school, and this RCL in turn elects those learners who have to represent learners on the school governing body.

The functions of the school governing bodies, of which the learners are part, are clearly stated in the South African Schools Act 1996. Functions include, among others, recommending the appointment of educators and non-educator staff, deciding on the language policy of the school, control and maintenance of the school property, and determining school fees. As members of the school governing bodies, learner representatives are also required to take part actively in the execution of these functions, which in most cases has produced 'more heat than light'. Some commentators suggest that, arguably, learners lack experience in educational matters. For example, adult members of SGBs may feel that learners are immature and thus unable to take sound decisions (Mncube, 2001:95). However, some writers argue that learners took an active part in the struggle for liberation in South Africa and as such they are supposed to take part in matters affecting their education in order that their voice be heard. In this respect Sithole (1995:99) argues that because students played a big role during the liberation of South Africa, they deserve to take part in all discussions regarding their education. Waghid (2005:132) argues that "teachers and learners ought to become responsive, democratic and critical — they need to act justly in order to break with South Africa's apartheid legacy", in order to create the spaces for responsibility, readiness and deliberation which would enable education to produce responsible, responsive and democratic citizens. In this way learners are regarded as equals, which is one issue in which social justice manifests itself.

Cockburn (2006) found that the learners' voice is effective when they attend the proposed meetings, but is more effective when learners actively take part in shaping the agenda of those meetings. Cockburn (2006) devised three definitions of involvement, namely, opportunity — where learners are given the opportunity to attend meetings; attendance — where learners take up that opportunity; and engagement — whereby learners not only attend, but are given a chance to make an effective contribution in meetings. Mncube (2005) suggests that those schools which willingly opened up space for deliberation and dialogue for learners were more democratic than their authoritarian counterparts. However, Karlsson (2002) suggests that, rather than preventing the inequalities of the apartheid South Africa, SGBs tend to exacerbate these inequalities of power relations, race, gender and socio-economic class. This becomes evident when learners are excluded from making crucial decisions on matters affecting their education. Van Wyk (1998) indicated that governors shift their responsibilities to the principals on the grounds that teachers are the ones who are more familiar with issues of school governance.

Various studies have been carried out on the functioning of school governing bodies in South Africa (Karlsson, 2002; McPherson, 2000; Carrim & Tshoane 2000; Mncube, 2005; Van Wyk, 1998; 2005; Sithole, 1995; Sayed, 1999; Heystek, 2004; Ngidi, 2004; Martin & Holt, 2002). However, little research has been conducted on learner participation in SGBs. Therefore I attempt to fill that gap.

### **Discussion of democratic principles and practices, and social justice**

The need for greater democracy in education has been supported by a great deal of literature both nationally and internationally (UNICEF, 1995; UNDP, 1993; 1994; 1995; Harber & Davies, 1997). However, various countries define democracy differently and the term democracy is highly contested (Davies, 1999). Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools, Carter *et al.* (2003) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only with experience of them. Therefore, schools need to practise what they seek to promote. Davies (2002) argues that a democratic theory of education is concerned with the process of “double democratisation”, the simultaneous democratisation of both education and society. This suggests that without the democratic development of a society, a more democratic system of education cannot be promoted. Conversely, without a more democratic system of education, the development of a democratic society is unlikely to occur. The school itself must be organised along democratic lines, taking into account that democracy is best learned in a democratic setting in which participation is encouraged, freedom of expression and a sense of justice and fairness prevails and democratic approaches function which allow the nurturing of qualities such as participation, innovation, co-operation, autonomy and initiative in learners and staff (Starkey, 1991).

Democratic theory and theories of social justice cannot be divorced from one another, particularly when one deliberates on participation and representation. Theories of social justice propose adequate mechanisms used to regulate social arrangements in the fairest way for the benefit of all. In terms of the present study, such theories refer to participation by all stakeholders in the governance of schooling, taking into consideration issues of power relations among the adult school governors and learner governors. Social justice has two major dimensions, namely, distributional and relational (Gewirtz, Ball & Bowe, 1995). The former refers to the way in which goods are distributed in a society and Rawls (1972) usefully defines it as follows:

The subject matter of justice is the basic structure of society, or more exactly, the way in which the major institutions ... distribute fundamental rights and duties and determine distribution of advantages from social co-operation (as cited in Gewirtz *et al.*, 1995:49).

The relational aspect of social justice has to do with procedural rights and is concerned with ordering social relations according to formal and informal rules that govern the way in which members of the society treat each other at both micro and macro levels. This dimension of social justice is holistic and

non-atomistic, since it is concerned with the nature of the interconnections between individuals in a society rather than focusing on an individual (Martin, 1999). In this respect, Young (2000) contends that democratic norms mandate inclusion as a criterion of political legitimacy. And democracy implies that all members of the polity are included equally in the decision-making process and, as such, these decisions would be considered by all as legitimate. She speaks of two types of inclusion, namely, external exclusion — where some individuals are kept out of the forums for debates or decision-making processes, and internal exclusion — these are exclusions where the individuals are normally included in the group, but are still excluded, for example, by the interaction privileges, language issues and participation of others who are dismissed as irrelevant (Young, 2000).

The foregoing discussion on the need for greater democracy in schools, in the light of the theory of social justice, provided the conceptual framework for a qualitative inquiry which explored whether these forms of exclusion prevail in the governance of South African secondary schools, by addressing the extent to which secondary school learners participate in school governing bodies in South Africa, and the nature of such participation.

### **Research problem**

The following research problem was identified:

What is the nature and extent of the involvement of learners in the democratisation of education through school governing bodies in South Africa?

### **Research methodology and methods**

To address the research problem, an inquiry using a qualitative approach was undertaken to ascertain the opinions and experiences of various governors regarding the involvement of learners in SGBs, with a view to further informing the research agenda and policy debates. I used the case study method and employed a variety of data-gathering methods, including observation, in-depth interviews, and document analysis to understand the internal dynamics of the functioning of a small sample of SGBs in secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal, with specific reference to learner participation.

#### **Data gathering**

Observation, interviews and document analysis were the principal methods of data gathering. I attended two formal meetings of governing bodies in each school, as an observer. Robson (2002) contends that by using observation, a researcher gets a real-life experience in the real world. This method was fore-grounded as a method of data collection. Informal observations, i.e. unplanned observations undertaken while the researcher was in the field, also occurred.

Semi-structured interviews were conducted to explore the feelings of school governors regarding learner participation in SGBs. Mertens (1998) con-

tends that interviews allow intimate, repeated and prolonged involvement of the researcher and the participant, which enables the researcher to get to the root of what is being investigated. I conducted 32 40-minute individual interviews. A common interview schedule was used for all the participants regardless of their constituency. In each governing body the following categories of governors were interviewed: a chair of governors; principal; two teaching staff governors; one non-teaching staff governor; two parent governors, and two learner governors.

In addition, I examined documentary sources. The documents were used only to complement observations and interviews and enhance accountability, and as such were not necessarily analysed in detail as substantive evidence. The main documents used were meeting agendas and minutes of the school governing bodies, letters to parents, annual reports to parents, discipline records and curriculum materials. For ethical reasons access to documents and records was negotiated in advance. The data were collected between the months of January and April in 2004.

### Data analysis

The data were analysed using the procedures typical of qualitative research. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and responses grouped according to the question asked. The governors' responses to each question were studied, thus gauging the views of the majority of respondents. There were no negative cases as the majority of governors were positive about learner participation in SGBs, though that was not always possible in practice. A manual analysis of data was possible due to the reasonable size of the sample.

### Sample and description of schools

The research was conducted in the four secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal selected by purposeful sampling. They were as follows: one former Model C school (this is a school which, during the apartheid era in South Africa, had accepted only white learners); a school which serves mainly 'coloured' learners; a rural school, and a township school, both of which were attended by black learners exclusively. Although race no longer has any official meaning in South Africa, these schools were chosen to represent historical racial differences and the unequal provision during the apartheid era. Pseudonyms were chosen for the schools to ensure anonymity.

Bournville Secondary School is a former Model C co-educational secondary school situated in pleasant urban surroundings in Eshowe, KwaZulu-Natal. The local neighbourhood is racially integrated and consists of middle-class families — however white residents predominate. It is a privileged school compared to the other three schools. It provides boarding for learners and has an enrolment of 622 learners. The majority of teaching and non-teaching staff are white. Eighteen teachers are employed by the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and ten teachers paid by the SGB from school fees. The staff of 28 teachers makes the school relatively well-staffed or even 'overstaffed', as

some governors in the school indicated during the interviews. Only about 60% of the learners can afford to pay school fees; 40% qualify for fee exemption. This does not include hostel fees, as this would affect comparison with the other three schools, which do not have boarding facilities. Buildings are large and well maintained compared to the other three schools. In 2003 the Grade 12 pass rate was 100%.

Rietvlei Secondary School is a co-educational secondary school formerly reserved for 'coloured' learners, although Indian learners were already being admitted during the apartheid era. Most teachers are coloured and lately the school has employed both Indian and black staff. The school is relatively advantaged and offers a range of academic subjects. The surrounding community is comprised of both middle- and working-class residents and half the learners commute from the surrounding rural areas in search of better quality education. According to the chairperson of the governing body, the buildings of the school are dilapidated as they had been vandalised in the past and had not since been repaired as a result of financial shortfalls, as most learners are exempted from paying school fees. Only 40% of parents can afford to pay fees of R1000 per year. In 2003 the Grade 12 pass rate was 99%.

Handsworth Secondary School is a co-educational rural school offering academic subjects and attended by black learners. It was built on the property of a church near Melmoth. The school is relatively disadvantaged, but better resourced than many other rural schools, e.g. it has electricity. Learners in the school are ethnically homogeneous and speak IsiZulu. The local community consists of a few working-class families and unemployment in the areas is very high. The buildings are in reasonably good repair for this type of school. Only 30% of parents are able to pay school fees of R180 per year. Education authorities regard this as one of the better schools in the region. However, in 2003 the Grade 12 pass rate was 39%.

Newtown Secondary School is a co-educational township school attended by black learners situated near Empangeni. Almost 50% of the learners cannot afford to pay school fees of R500 per year and thus qualify for fee exemption. The Grade 12 pass rate for 2003 was 40%.

## **Findings and discussion**

The following themes emerged and are arranged according to the questions asked during the interviews.

### **Involvement of learner governors in decision-making process**

Participants were asked: 'To what extent do learner governors participate in decision-making?' The majority of governors suggested that learners participate by representing the learner body by communicating their views and opinions in the SGB. Representation of learners is aimed at ensuring that learners are not deprived of their interests and rights. However, even this limited view of learner participation has proved problematic in the past, particularly in rural and township schools, where adult members have been

reluctant to enter into discussions with minors. However, it was noted that some governors were still conventional in their approach. For example, the chair of governors from Newtown Secondary School perceived learner governors as minors who hardly contribute to debates, and who are there purely to listen to the discussions on behalf of other learners.

The data suggest that the extent of participation by various stakeholders is influenced by several factors such as the type of school (rural, urban, or a township school), the stakeholders themselves (adult and non-adult SGB members), the regularity of attendance of meetings, and gender. For example, participation of learners at Handsworth Secondary School (a rural school) was limited and learners were not given a fair chance to air their opinions and concerns. When sensitive issues were to be discussed, learner governors were asked to leave the meeting. For example, learners were requested to leave even when the main issue was the proposed expulsion of a learner who had stabbed another learner and this issue directly affected learners in the school. This type of exclusion is unfortunate as learners have the right to know about disciplinary procedures, the progress of the case and the motivation for expulsion. In this case the school principal indicated that the reason to expel the learner was for the sake of the security of other learners. It would appear that the discussion could have been enhanced by learner participation and the principles of fairness and justice would have been upheld. Some decisions are not taken in the presence of learner governors, but are made for them, in the belief that there is no need for learner governors to comment, as they would be too lenient if decisions were to be taken about their peers, so they only need to be informed by the SGB of the outcome of such decisions. Another issue was that of the code of conduct for learners, which in some schools is compiled by teachers without consulting learners and given to the learners without their contribution.

Participation of learner governors can also be inhibited by the leadership style of certain school principals, who tend to take over the role of school governing bodies and make decisions on their behalf together with their SMTs. The above anecdote about Handsworth Secondary School is a case in point. By so doing the school principals are contravening the Act. Section 16 (1) and 16 (2) of SASA 1996 clearly differentiate between the roles of the principal and those of the school governors by stating that the governance of the school is the responsibility of the SGB and the principal is responsible for the professional management of the school. Moreover, it appeared that some learner governors found it difficult to regard themselves as fully legitimate members of the SGB and they still perceived themselves as 'guests' on the governing body. Learner governors seemed aware of a 'we and they' divide as was noted in the usage of the pronoun 'they', when learners referred to adult governors. A learner governor said,

*When you [learner] attend the meetings of the SGB, they [adult governors] make you feel like you are one of them and you forget that you are a learner. This makes us feel that we are fully accepted as members of the SGB and not only there for window-dressing.*

Furthermore, the majority of governors identified certain advantages of learner involvement. They felt learner participation improved the functioning of the SGB as it gave everyone a sense of ownership and accountability and it had helped to curb some problems that had occurred in the past, such as the incidents of vandalism. A parent, the chairperson of the SGB at Bournville, confirmed that it had become easier to meet the needs of learners through the involvement of learner governors and much had been achieved for the learners through their involvement in the SGBs. For example, a new gymnasium was recently built at the school through the involvement of RCLs, as a way of addressing the needs of learners. Moreover, a parent governor at Rietvlei noted that learner needs and concerns were effectively communicated to the SGB through their peers. Therefore findings suggested that learners appeared to be playing an important role in representing the voice of the learners, as corroborated in other research (Martin, 1999; Williams, 1998; Watkins, 1991).

Furthermore, learners in the schools, with the exception of Handsworth, are included in all decisions dealing with disciplinary matters and finance. Learners also take part in discussions on the selection of staff, although they do not form part of the interview panel. They also make inputs on staff disciplinary matters, except where the discipline of the teaching staff is handled.

Research findings of the present study also suggested that gender still has an effect on the participation of school governors. For example, the chairperson of the SGB at Newtown Secondary School indicated that female governors tend to leave most decisions to male members in the hope that they will make sound decisions. This attitude is the result of traditional gender stereotypes prevalent in South Africa, which still affect performance. Coupled with gender is the issue of power relations, which also have an effect on learner participation. Female learner governors tended to be overshadowed by their male counterparts when it came to decision-making due to the gendered nature of South African society. During the interviews it was disclosed that female learner governors tended to be less vocal than male learner governors and relinquished decision-making activities to male learner governors. This was confirmed during observations of the SGB meetings.

In general the interviews showed that, in spite of certain positive outcomes, some governors did not accord learner governors the status of fully fledged members of the SGB, responsible for their own actions. This confirmed the findings of studies conducted by Van Wyk (1998), McPherson (2000), Sithole (1995), and Carrim and Tshoane (2000).

#### Involvement of learners in curriculum issues

Governors from the four case study schools were asked: "In your opinion, do you think learners should be involved or not in decisions on curriculum issues; meaning what subjects and learning experiences are to be made available in the school?"

This question sought to establish the opinions of participants as to whe-



ther they thought learners should be involved in curriculum issues; it was not intended to ascertain whether learners were already involved in addressing curriculum issues. Therefore it was not possible to determine to what extent learners were currently involved in curriculum decisions. However, some involvement of learners was indicated. The majority of governors in all four schools indicated that learners should be involved in curriculum issues. They felt that as learners are the direct beneficiaries of the curriculum, they need to take part in discussions on what affects their education. Moreover, the majority of governors believed that the involvement of learners in curriculum issues might increase their interest in education, and improve achievement, which would, in turn, make the school more marketable. The attractiveness of the school would draw more learners to the school and thus generate greater income through school fees. It would strengthen the argument that learners should participate in all school issues, including discussions about curriculum. Sithole (1995) contends that as learners had taken part in the liberation struggle in South Africa, they deserved the right of full participation in all decisions pertaining to their education. However, the minority of governors maintained that learners lack the expertise required for input into curriculum matters. Therefore, they felt that learners should act only as observers during deliberations on curriculum issues and knowledgeable members (i.e. the teachers) should take crucial decisions in this area. This view is corroborated by Van Wyk's (1998) research.

The above discussion reflects the perceived gap between professional knowledge and lay knowledge and the way this affects power relations. In this vein, Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995) contend that power relations are central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and that power relations are "an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of the school governing bodies as organizations" (Deem *et al.*, 1995:133). The functioning of the SGBs is complicated by the membership of both education professionals and lay people, each of which hold their own views on the role of the school, how it should be organised, and how learners should be managed.

The present research confirmed that power struggles occurred on governing bodies between different types of governors. Such struggles were most obvious between chairs of governing bodies and principals, where the latter tended to want to usurp the dominant governing role or *vice versa*. This was also particularly true for learners at the rural school, where the learners (and parents) were excluded from decision making. This may explain why some parents become unhappy with the teaching staff, for, as some writers have suggested, where there is power struggle, there is also resistance (Foucault, 1977; Deem *et al.*, 1995). However, in some cases, as Van Wyk (1998) suggests, governing bodies tend to delegate their functions to the principal, as they believe education 'experts' are more informed about educational matters than lay people. This finding was corroborated by the present research, although it varied between individual schools.

### The role of school governing bodies in promoting democracy in schools

Participants from the four schools were asked: “Does your school governing body contribute to democracy in the school?” In all four schools the majority of governors believed that school governing bodies contributed to the democratic functioning of the school. Participants indicated that SGBs contributed to democracy as the voting process that occurs during elections for SGBs informs them of how voting occurs and thus empowers them as citizens. Moreover, their interpretations of democracy included issues of freedom of expression, the right to participation in decision making and the notion of representation. In the former Model C school, learners had come to realise that members of different racial groups have equal rights and can learn together harmoniously in a desegregated school environment. Governors from all the four case study schools were also asked: “Does your school governing body contribute to democracy in the wider South African society?” This was the explicit aim of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996. The majority of participants’ answers suggested that they were convinced that the school governing bodies contributed to democracy in South Africa. For example, formerly many parents had not allowed their children to engage in discussions with them, thus exercising the traditional authoritarian approach maintained at home and finding it difficult to allow learners to participate in the debates during meetings. However, learners were now able to take part in meetings and make decisions, and parents have gradually learned to accept learners as full members of the governing bodies. As members of SGBs practise democracy in schools, they eventually learn that democracy is a way of life and they also convey this outside the school, thus spreading democratic principles to the wider society.

Governors noted that the right to vote for any particular candidate in SGB elections without intimidation or pressure familiarised them with fair and free voting processes in general. What happened on the SGBs could also be implemented during other elections, such as municipal, provincial and national elections, and thus good democratic practices become more widespread. By practising democracy within the school, all stakeholders learn how a democracy functions and appreciate that such practices can be applied outside the school in the same way. The majority of participants referred to the characteristics of a democracy and showed understanding of its core values — participation, representation, collective decision making, tolerance, and rational discussion. Moreover, other values such as human rights, transparency and openness, consultation, freedom of expression, shared vision and goals, freedom of choice, tribunals and protection of privacy were mentioned in the interviews.

If one were to rank the schools in order of democratisation in terms of learner participation, Bournville, a former Model C school, could be described as operating more democratically than the other three schools. The SGB at this school is actively engaged in school governance and has a sense of ownership of the school. McPherson (2000) corroborates the findings of this research by attributing the success of the former model C schools to the

following factors:

- The suburban SGB is more resourceful at fundraising by exploiting the private sector to obtain sponsorships;
- During SGB elections they succeed in bringing in parents' managerial expertise onto the SGB and are thus able to garner sufficient resources;
- The SGB governs an already well-resourced school that benefited from unequal financial provision of the apartheid era;
- The SGB has the advantage of governing a school with an already well-developed solid infrastructure; and
- Lastly, the SGB markets the school effectively, which in turn helps the sustainability through continued enrolment levels and paid-up school fees.

In response to the poor performance of other SGBs, the Department of Education (2004) in the Ministerial Review of school governance in South Africa contends that the rules and regulations regarding the election of governors are not sufficiently comprehensive to deal with the challenges of representivity and inclusivity. This notion may account for the exclusion of learners in participating, as happened in Newtown.

While steady and noticeable progress in democratisation was noted in Rietvlei and Newtown, they lagged behind Bournville. Rietvlei and Newtown could be described as more or less on a par in terms of democratisation; the latter seemingly operating better than the former, due to a strong chair of governors, who is a university lecturer. The chair of governors at Rietvlei is an elderly woman with a lower educational background and less democratic tendencies. Handsworth, a rural school, performs the poorest in terms of school governance. Owing to a lack of training, the principal was acting *ultra vires* and contravened several sections of the SASA by excluding and not recognising learners in decision-making processes. The differences between democratisation of urban and rural schools is noticeable, with the rural school on the negative extreme, while the former model C school is on the positive extreme.

The findings imply that enough space should be created for learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs so that they engage fruitfully in deliberations dealing with school governance. In this way there is great potential for their voice to be heard and they would feel the sense of belonging, and hence engage fruitfully in dialogue as they feel included in debates. By allowing the learners' voice to be heard there is a great potential for them to be part of school governance issues and SGBs might arrive at what Martin and Holt (2002) refer to as the joined-up governance, while silencing the voice of learners implicitly or would explicitly mean that the issues of social justice and democracy are not taken into consideration in SGBs. By this I mean that learners should be allowed to take part fully in decisions affecting their education. To enhance their confidence, the language used in SGB meetings should be accommodative to all learners and this would have a potential of helping, particularly for the black learners in the former model C schools. This means that students who are elected to the SGBs should have a good command of English language to enhance their communication. When electing the

learner representatives on the SGB, care should be taken to consider the level of the communication skills of that particular learner so as to allow for her/his adequate and effective participation in deliberations and arguments. However, this might be seen by others as some form of exclusion or as a means to deprive learners of their choice, and can thus be seen as undemocratic. Arguably, democracy does not have to be regarded as a *laissez faire* kind of situation where people do as they please. There should be clear demarcations between the roles of the teaching staff and those of the other governors. Young (2000) contends that democracy produces justice and this is what makes the theories of social justice and democracy inseparable when one addresses the issues of participation.

### **Conclusion**

In this article I discussed the findings of a study investigating the representation and the role of learners in the school governing bodies, learners' involvement in decision making, the involvement of learners in curriculum issues, the role of SGBs in promoting democracy in the school and the wider South African society. I argued that learners do participate according to the general intentions of the South African Schools Act in some school governance issues. However, they are still not given a full chance to participate in crucial decisions affecting the life of their school. They are sometimes denied the right to full participation by the adult members of SGBs, who regard learners as too inexperienced to deal with crucial matters affecting the life of the school.

Gender also plays a role in shaping learner participation as a result of traditional gender stereotypes which still prevail and inhibit the performance of women. The findings confirm that the issue of power relations is always prevalent in school governance, as noted by Deem *et al.* (1995), who contend that power relations are central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and that power relations are "an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of the school governing bodies as organizations" (Deem *et al.*, 1995:133). Power relations also play a significant role in relation to gender issues. Female learner governors tended to be overshadowed by their male counterparts during decision making, because of the gendered nature of South African society. In most SGBs female learner governors tended to be less vocal than male learner governors. Nevertheless, it was found that SGBs help spread democratic practices in the school and in the wider South African society. Creating a space for learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs would allow them to exercise their right to participation, thus engaging fruitfully in deliberations dealing with school governance. In this way social justice would prevail and there would be a great potential for their voice to be heard, and they would feel a sense of belonging hence engaging fruitfully in dialogues as they feel included in debates and decision-making processes, thus arriving at what Martin and Holt (2002) refer to as the 'joined-up governance'. Silencing the voice of learners implicitly or explicitly would mean that the issues of social justice and democracy are not taken into consideration in SGBs.

Waghid (2005:132) has argued that teachers and learners ought to act justly in order to break with South Africa's apartheid legacy in which inequalities were the order of the day, and learner participation has to be vociferously encouraged if social justice is to prevail. This would be possible if the space is created for learners to exercise their sense of responsibility, demonstrate their readiness and practise deliberation, which would enable the education system to produce responsible, responsive and democratic citizens. In this way learners would be regarded as equals, which is one of the ways in which social justice manifests itself, and learners' voices would become more effective, as Cockburn (2006) has stated. In this way SGBs would be in a position to counteract a situation whereby, instead of preventing the inequalities of the apartheid South Africa, they rather tend to exacerbate these inequalities of power relations; race, gender, and socio-economic class (cf. Karlson, 2002). If learners are treated as equal partners in SGBs, there is a great possibility that they will feel empowered to participate effectively in SGBs.

As Mncube, (2007) has suggested, while representation and debate are theoretically open and fair, structural and behavioural factors still inhibit the extent to which SGBs operate. Overall, the authoritarianism of school management and governance characteristic of the apartheid era has disappeared, yet problematic issues concerning the values and skills necessary for full democratic participation remain. It is recommended that a longitudinal study of learner participation should be carried out so as to attempt to ensure that principles of democracy and social justice are honoured by SGBs.

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