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**An investigation into the role of student participation in school  
governance:  
A Namibian perspective**

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## ABSTRACT

The issue of student participation in school governance is not a new concept in Namibian schools. Student involvement dates back to the 1970's when the country's administration was under the South African apartheid regime. Back then the involvement of students in school affairs was seen by the regime as a political act and attempts by student leaders to involve themselves in educational issues were often quashed. When the country became independent student representation continued as Student Representative Councils (SRC's), later renamed Learners Representative Councils (LRCs). This study attempted to investigate the perceptions of LRCs and other stakeholders - namely the school principals and the school board members - of the role of students in school governance.

The study was conducted in three Senior Secondary Schools in the Kavango region in Namibia. The research respondents were school principals, chairpersons of the LRCs and one chairperson of a school board. The study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm employing the following three qualitative research methods interviews, observation and document analysis to collect data. Through triangulation it was possible to formulate a rich response to the research question.

The study found that, although the notion of student participation in school governance was widely accepted, a number of challenges exist that hamper the effectiveness of LRCs in the schools. It was revealed that there was no national policy document that outlined the roles and function of the LRCs. As a result schools had little direction about the LRCs and subsequently they were given little or no attention by the school authorities. This resulted in misunderstandings and in some cases conflict between learners and the school management. The most significant consequence of these problems was the fact that LRCs were not regarded as true role players in school governance.

The study thus recommends that a national policy document that legitimates the role of students in school governance be drafted to provide direction and that schools embark on meaningful training programmes for LRC members. The study also calls for further research to address the gap in literature on this phenomenon, particularly in Namibia.

## **Dedication**

This study is dedicated to the lovely special boys in my life, Twamona, Twayambekwa and Tangi. This study is one of many testimonies that you are the products of intellectuals. It should thus serve as a source of inspiration to you and the next generation. It is my humble prayer that you grow into intelligent responsible citizens that Namibia has ever produced.

For you the sky is the limit.



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## **Chapter 1 - Introduction**

In this chapter I present an historical background of and context for this study of student participation in school governance in Namibia. I then provide a rationale and motivation for undertaking the study, present the goal and research question and briefly discuss the methodology. Finally, I provide an outline of how the thesis is structured.

### **1.1 Historical background and research context**

The issue of student participation in school governance is not a new concept in Namibian education. In Namibia, student participation in school affairs dates back to the 1970's when the country's administration was under South Africa's control. It started with the institutionalization of apartheid in South Africa and the subsequent introduction of Bantu Education that spilled over to Namibia (Amukugo, 1993, p.114). The Bantu Education system, the irrelevant curriculum together with other forms of discrimination imposed on people triggered rebellion and resistance among the students countrywide. According to Amukugo (1993)

The 1970's witnessed more great concern for issues that affect students and society at large. This period was characterized by class boycotts and other forms of resistance against the colonial rule (p.116).

Consequently the student movement known as the Namibian National Student's Organization (NANSO) was formed in June 1984. NANSO's objectives amongst others were:

- To fight against Bantu Education.
- To fight against inequalities in society and in the provision of education.
- To fight for English and against Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in schools.
- To get rid of the so called 'prefect system' in Secondary Schools and replace it with the Student Representative Council (SRC).
- To fight against the militarization of schools. (Amukugo, 1993, p.119)

In general the movement facilitated demonstrations and boycotts of classes in schools to show students' discontent and disapproval of these repressive laws. This same situation

was to be found in South Africa as a reaction to the apartheid regime. In most cases these shows of resistances were crushed fiercely by the regime and many students were either expelled from schools or were forced to leave the country (Hartshorne, 1992). It is also reported in Amukugo (1993) that all these efforts by the regime to silence the students were in vain because

Where student leaders were expelled following the major resistance activities, new leaders emerged and continued where the others left off. It was difficult for the state's repressive machinery to crush the student resistance movement (p.125).

Following the independence of the country in 1990, Namibia was faced with the challenge of bringing about transformation, not only in education but in all public and private sectors. Driven by principles of democracy institutions were expected to institutionalize democracy in their operations. In the education sector full participation of all stakeholders in decision making became the driving force. This was also affirmed by the first Namibian president Dr Sam Nujoma at the Etosha Conference in 1991:

It is my belief that no true reform in education, or in any other area for that matter, can take place without full participation of everyone at grassroots level within the educational communities throughout Namibia (Snyder as cited in Sithole, 1998b, p.104).

As part of this commitment the Ministry of Education had the responsibility to enhance participation of stakeholders in the education system. There was a great need for community involvement from the parents' side and importantly also from the students who are, after all, the primary beneficiaries of the education process. As a result the existing student representative bodies in senior secondary schools – the SRC's – were validated and given a different name, Learners' Representative Council (LRCs). In addition school governing bodies called School Boards (SBs) were introduced. These governing bodies constituted parents, teachers and learners who serve as LRC members. The roles and functions of both the LRC and the School Board are clearly stipulated in the Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 2001, Education Act No 16..



This sharing of power amongst parents, teachers and learners has however remained a contentious issue in Namibia. There are opposing views and mixed feelings regarding the learners' participation in school governance. A feeling especially among adults that students' participation in school affairs is no longer necessary since there is peace and stability in the country prevails. It is argued that the responsibility of school governance must be left to the government and the parents, so that learners can concentrate on their studies. This view is also strengthened by cultural beliefs that children are not supposed to discuss important issues with adults, and hence participation in school affairs especially in School Boards would be contrary to national culture. Sithole (1998a) argues that:

On cultural and traditional grounds, elderly people do not discuss important matters in the presence of children, and to do so now would tarnish the respect which children must accord their elders, and bring about decay and morass in the traditional value system (p.12).

A counter argument is that democratic school governance is the result of the student struggle and it would therefore be unfair if learners were excluded from the decision making process. The feeling is that learners' participation in their own education cannot be compromised. Learners should be granted the same status as other stakeholders and be allowed to participate unconditionally in the governing of the school and to have an influence on the direction of transformation at all levels.

Student participation in school governance has been explored in South Africa. Research conducted by Nongubo (2004) revealed that learner involvement in school governance in South Africa was still problematic though policies and regulations regarding Learners Representative Councils were in place. The study revealed that there was an indecisive and autocratic mindset among educators regarding the sharing of power and decision making with learners. Nongubo further indicated that the Department of Education was not taking steps to close the gap between learners and the educators (Nongubo, 2004, p. ii). Similarly a study by Chinsamy (1995) confirmed the need for student participation in



school governance. According to his findings the participation of learners in school governance would contribute to a positive climate of teaching and learning in schools. He also pointed out the dilemma that students faced regarding participation in decision making with adults (Chinsamy, 1995, p.iii).

It is against this background that I was prompted to do research on this phenomenon. I now present the motivation for this study.

## **1.2 Research Motivation**

A number of factors motivated me to undertake this study. Firstly, student participation in school governance is a hotly contested issue in Namibia but I am not aware of any research in this field. This research is therefore likely to help to fill the gap that exists in the literature. Secondly, having been a student leader during my school years, I feel strongly that the voice of the learners should never fade from the educational scene. I say this with a great concern because I can testify to the significant contributions that learners have made towards improving the education system through learners' representative bodies in the past.

## **1.3 Purpose and potential value**

The primary purpose of the study was to uncover the 'reality' of what selected stakeholders felt about student participation, and to inform the relevant decision makers so that the necessary action could be taken. The study will serve as a mirror for stakeholders that are entrusted with the responsibility of involving all the role players in a school including the learners. Langenveld (as cited in Bell, 2005, p.28) emphasized the importance of educational research as follows:

is a 'practical science' in the sense that we do not only want to know facts and understand relations for the sake of knowledge; we want to know and understand in order to be able to act and act 'better' than we did before (p.28).

To act 'better' one needs reliable and pertinent information and it is my hope that this study can help to provide this.

## **1.4 Research goal and question**

The purpose of the research was to explore the views and experiences of the learners, the principals and the School Board chairpersons regarding the learners' role in school governance in three secondary schools in the Kavango region. The research question driving this research was: How do learners, principals and School Board chairpersons perceive and experience the role of learners in school governance? Since the learners' participation in governance occurs through LRCs the study is essentially an investigation of LRCs in the three selected schools.

## **1.5 Research Methodology**

The study was conducted in the interpretive paradigm using a qualitative approach. I found this method relevant to this study because I wanted to understand the experiences and perceptions of the people involved. Neuman (2000) describes the interpretive approach as

the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understanding and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social world (p.71).

In order to achieve the objectives of the study I employed multiple tools to collect data namely document analysis, semi structured interviews and observation. The rationale behind using different tools is to enhance the validity of the data collected through triangulation. Arksey & Knight (as cited in Nongubo, 2004) argue that

approaching research questions from different angles and bringing together a range of views has the potential to generate new and alternative explanations, ones that better capture the social complexity that the fieldwork explores (p.52).

I started by studying the official documents available at the schools. The purpose of starting with the documents was to familiarize myself with the role of learners in a school and the policies that were in place. Documents studied included the minutes of previous LRC's meetings, the School Board meetings, the School Management Teams (SMT) meetings, the Education Act and the constitutions governing LRCs in schools.

Semi structured interviews were conducted in order to get a full account of the phenomenon. Two of the three principals, all three LRC chairpersons and one School Board chairperson were interviewed. I used semi-structured interviews to achieve what McMillan & Schumacher (2001) describe as:

Open-response questions to obtain data of participant meanings - how individuals conceive of their world and how they explain or "make sense" of the important events in their lives (p.450).

The interviews were structured in a way that created the opportunity for the interviewee to give sincere, honest responses and allowed the interviewer to probe issues that were not clear by asking follow up questions. Interviews were conducted in English with the exception of the School Board chairperson who was interviewed in the local language. They were all tape-recorded with the permission of the participants.

I had planned to conduct observations of School Board (SB) meetings where some members of the LRCs would be present. However, only one of the school's meetings was observed since the other schools failed to convene their meetings as planned. I used an observation schedule to focus on the areas under examination. The focus was on the level of participation of learners in discussions and the reaction of adults towards learners. The proceedings in these meetings were done in the local language because some School Board members could not understand English but all the notes were taken in English.

The data collected from all three techniques were finally analyzed using a qualitative data analysis technique. The emerging ideas and concepts were grouped together by looking at the patterns of differences and similarities across the three data sets. This was done with the purpose of ensuring the validity of the data collected. Wilkinson (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.56) argues that validity "relates broadly to the extent to which an instrument measures what it claims to measure, or tests what it is intended to test".

To observe protocol and to follow proper channels, all relevant authorities - namely the Director of Education and the Circuit Inspector - were consulted to gain permission to conduct the study in the three schools. All participants were informed of the purpose and objectives of the research to allow them to make informed decisions on their role as respondents in the study. They were informed about their rights to participate freely or to withdraw from the study any time they felt uncomfortable with the process. To instil confidence and trust in participants I assured them of their anonymity and of the confidentiality on information they shared with me. All members were provided with a copy of their transcripts to confirm the authenticity of their views before the final report was produced.

This study focused only on three secondary schools in the Kavango region in Namibia. The views presented here are entirely from the three schools and may not necessarily represent views of other schools in that region or other schools in other educational regions in the country.

## **1.6 Thesis outline**

In chapter two I present an overview of literature that is relevant to the topic and research goal. According to Hart (as cited in Nongubo, 2004)

a review of the literature is important because without it you will not acquire an understanding of your topic, of what has already been done on it, how it has been researched and what the key issues are (p.8).

This chapter proved to be a difficult one because of the limited range of literature on student participation in school governance, I did, however, manage to gather some relevant information from the few sources available.

Chapter three outlines the methodology employed in collecting data. It gives an overview of procedures followed in collecting and organizing data for analysis and interpretation.

The chapter also comments on validity and ethical issues considered in conducting social science research.

Chapter four presents the raw data collected as generated from various techniques. In this chapter my role as a researcher is to organize data into categories and themes from the variety of sources where I collected my data.

Chapter five presents a detailed interpretation and analysis of the data that I presented in the previous chapter. Here I discuss the findings in light of the relevant literature.

Chapter six concludes the study. It presents a summary of the main findings and makes recommendations for practice to the relevant stakeholders and future research.



## **Chapter 2 - Literature Review**

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter is a review of literature on student participation in school governance. I begin by clarifying the distinction between the two concepts 'management' and 'governance'. This is necessary because although the two are interrelated, the emphasis in this study is on the learners' participation and role in school governance. For various reasons - even though learners are recognized as stakeholders in education - they are not allowed to play any role in the management of the schools. The concepts of management and governance have been used throughout this chapter. This distinction is important as sometimes even the role players in a school become confused over their roles and responsibilities. I thus begin by clarifying and highlighting the distinction between the two.

Next I present an overview of how student participation has been viewed in the past. Traditionally in many cultures it was a taboo to have children around the table when adults discuss important issues and this tradition has perhaps hampered the development of learner participation in school governance. These attitudes might be influenced by the ideas of the classical philosophers like Locke, Hobbes, Mill and others on children's rights.

With the advent of democracy governing styles have undergone a paradigm shift in their way of thinking and as a result traditional views have been heavily criticized. In the next section I discuss contemporary views that have emerged based on the principles of democracy. I begin by defining the concept of democracy and how it is perceived in the education context. Here I draw on some examples from the Namibian perspective.

The next section is a brief overview of the South African education system. This provides an example of how a country with similar challenges to Namibia is dealing with the issue of learner involvement. I start with the role of students in education during the apartheid era, the PTAs that were formed as structures for parents, teachers and learners to have a

voice in decision making and the running of the schools. The section continues by looking at education in the new South Africa, the policies in place and the position of students in decision making. I draw on three studies that were conducted in South Africa regarding the democratic participation of learners in school governance since 1994.

Next I look at Namibia's position on democratic participation of students in school governance. I look at policies that are in place, for example the Education Act, that guarantee the democratic participation of secondary school learners. The School Boards are official governing bodies that were established for the purpose of accommodating other stakeholders in the running of the school affairs. The Act made provision for learners to be part of these structures represented by their student representative bodies the LRCs. I therefore give a brief overview of what the implementation of these policies entails and how these bodies are being introduced in the Namibian education system.

Finally, since LRCs are student leadership bodies, I discuss leadership theories that are founded on the principle of democratic participation. These theories - participative and distributed leadership – suggest that in modern organizations power and leadership should be shared by all members of the organization to ensure maximum productivity. The theories therefore have the potential for providing a theoretical framework for this study. I also look at the benefits and the limitations of these leadership approaches in schools.

## **2.2 Management or governance?**

Throughout this study the concepts of management and governance are used. The two are interrelated but distinct and this can create confusion that may contribute to the conflict of responsibilities for members in the school. What follows is a discussion of these two concepts.



### 2.2.1 What is school management?

The term school management became popular in education after independence in Namibia in 1990. The term 'management' may refer to senior people, a group of managers at the school level who are entrusted with the running of the school. These people include the principal, the head of departments (HODs) responsible for different departments at school and in some cases one or two extra members appointed on merit from the staff. These people together are referred to as the School Management Team (SMT).

However, the term may also refer to a phenomenon, an activity or process. Hoyle (as cited in Nongubo 2004) defines management as

a continuous process through which members of an organization seek to coordinate their activities and utilize their resources in order to fulfill the various tasks of the organization as efficiently as possible (p.22)

SMTs are responsible for running the day to day activities in a school and to ensure that proper teaching and learning is taking place. It takes sound management in a school in order for planned activities to run smoothly and resources to be fully utilized for the benefit of all the stakeholders. According to Sithole (1998b, p.106 "It (the SMT) operationalises and implements school policy as formulated and adopted by the school governance structure".

In other words, management is confined to the running of *internal* affairs in the school on a daily basis. It has to do with instructional functions that directly involve those who are in formal positions and teachers to ensure that available human and material resources are utilized to ensure that quality teaching and learning is taking place in a school.

### 2.2.3 What is school governance?

Governance is a relatively new concept in schooling in Southern Africa. In South Africa the School Governing Body is a structure that is responsible for governing the school based on long term planning and broad planning and policy development. As Sithole (1998b) states:

the institutional structure that is entrusted with the responsibility and authority to formulate and adopt school policy on a range of issues, for example: the mission and ethos of the school, school uniform and colors, budgetary and development priorities, code of conduct for students, staff and parents, broad goals on educational quality that the school should strive to achieve, school community relations, curriculum programme development and so on (p.106).

In Namibia the governing bodies are referred to as School Boards but have the same function. School governance comprises parents, community members, teachers who are not in formal leadership positions, and learners. Their functions are broader than the SMTs and they are responsible for taking the major decisions that have to be implemented at the school under the leadership of the SMTs. As I said earlier one cannot function without the other and the collaboration between the two is crucial if the school is to achieve its pre-determined objectives.

Since 1990 when Namibia gained independence democratic participation has been encouraged in private and public institution. It was anticipated that, with learners being stakeholders in the education system, they would also play their role specifically in school governance. In the next section I look at an overview of student participation in school governance.

## **2.3 Student participation in school governance – an overview**

### **2.3.1 Traditional views**

The issue of student participation has been an ongoing debate not only in African schools but in schools all over the world. Early researchers of education saw very little need for student participation in school affairs. Wringe, Dunlop & Ruddick (as cited in Chinsamy, 1995, p.11) who wrote extensively on the issue, based their arguments on the ideas of classical philosophers, amongst others Locke, Hobbes and Mill. These philosophers believed in paternalism, the notion that believes that it is parents who have the responsibility to think and take decisions on behalf of their children. They presented a number of convincing arguments against children in decision making in general and education in particular. They felt strongly that in the interest of efficiency and good order, a totalitarian form of school governance should be employed. It is argued on economic grounds that participation of students in decision making is inefficient in terms of time, money and resources. They argued that it would unnecessarily increase administrative costs and demand additional structures to be established for the communication of necessary information (Chinsamy, 1995, p.11).

The belief was that children were immature and incompetent and needed to be under the jurisdiction of their parents until such time as they were ready to shift to adulthood. John Locke (cited in Chinsamy, 1995, p.10) argued that “children can cast off their dependency when they become adults and are rational enough to understand the principles by which they are governed”.

Research reveals that these views were not only shared by parents but also by schools. It appears that school authorities have shown little faith in students regarding the sharing of power with the learners. According to Buckley (as cited in Chinsamy, 1995) “not because they doubt the resulting good but because they cannot face the change in their traditional

position". Moreover, they based their arguments on the fact that issues that are discussed at school are "intellectually rooted" and require teachers' competence and expertise. As a result it would be pointless and a waste of time to have students in decision making structures (p.11).

These views still survive in the 21<sup>st</sup> century in certain societies. A study conducted by Sithole (1998) on the participation of students in democratic school governance in South Africa revealed that some adults were still struggling to come to terms with students' participation in school governance. They felt that having students in school governance was unacceptable. They argued that parents had the responsibility of sending them to school and paying their student fees, and of course they always knew what was best for their children. According to Sithole (1998b)

on cultural and traditional grounds elders do not discuss important issues in the presence of the children. To do so now would tarnish the respect which children must accord their elders, and bring about decay and morass in the traditional value system. (p.98)

### **2.3.2 Contemporary views**

Over the last century there has been a paradigm shift in organizational leadership and management thinking. There has been an increasing demand for democratic participation in decision making in organizations (O'Connell as cited in Sithole, 1999b, p.94). Students in schools began to realize that there was a need for them to be represented in decision making structures at school level. The institutionalization of democracy in institutions has raised awareness. Drawing on the literature from Namibia I look next at the concept and the broader meaning of democracy and how it is applied in the education system.

### 2.3.2.1 Democracy

In simple language democracy can be defined as government of the people by the people for the people. The Oxford Advanced Learners Dictionary (2005) defines democracy as

a system in which all the people of a country can vote to elect their representatives.

It further says “a fair and equal treatment of everyone in an organization etc; and their right to take part in making decisions based on the principle that all members have an equal right to be involved in running an organization”.(p389)

People sometimes understand democracy as a political term only that has to do with how governments rule and they do not see any relevance to their own lives. According to Sithole (1998a) “democracy is not only about people voting for government once every four or five years, but that people should participate on a daily basis in decision making process of their lives” (p.47). Chinsamy (1995) similarly argued that the universal definition of democracy was vague and therefore a simpler definition should be added to it to make sense even to the layman in the street. In his view, democracy is more often taken to be a form of political organization and an arrangement for government than being viewed as a way of life (p.21). It is for this reason that the term needs to be clarified and expanded so that all people in society irrespective of their educational status would have a clear understanding of how it could apply to their lives.

### 2.3.2.2 Democracy in education

As governments move towards democracy the institutionalization of democracy has become inevitable in organizations. Schools as public institutions were assumed to be open systems whereby not only teachers but the community, parents and learners were regarded as equal stakeholders. According to Bush (2003) “open systems theory shows the relationship between the institution and external groups such as **parents, employers,**



**learners** [my emphasis] and the local education authority". The boundaries of the school are expected to be permeable so that both the external and the internal environment will contribute meaningfully to the governance and management of the school (p.42).

Shortly after independence in 1990 the Ministry of Education and Culture in Namibia pledged its commitment to democracy in education. Democracy became one of the four major goals of education. In the statement Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture [MEC], 1993, *Toward Education For All* the ministry emphasized that

democracy is our commitment to develop an education system that will play a central role in transforming our society. To teach democracy we must be democratic. And being democratic will enable us to expand access and promote equity and quality (p. 67).

The statement continued:

We cannot expect our citizens to contribute to our schools without having a voice in their management and functioning. And we cannot ask our students and their parents to behave responsibly toward community schools unless they also have some responsibility for those schools (p.171).

Therefore policy clearly points to the need to democratize the education system to the point where students share in the responsibility of governing schools.

## **2.4 Learning from other experiences**

In this section I present a brief review of the literature on a few studies that were done in South Africa on the area of student participation in school governance. Student participation has been a contentious issue in South Africa, even before the democratic elections in 1994. When the new government took office the country had to undergo

major restructuring and transformation of their education system, and the role of learners in governance has also received attention.

It is appropriate for Namibia to learn from the situation in South Africa, not only because the two are neighbouring countries, but because the two share the same legacy of apartheid and the challenges they now face are similar. It is my belief that Namibian readers will find the literature from South African studies informative, relevant and beneficial.

#### **2.4.1 Education in a pre-democratic South Africa**

The institutionalization of apartheid in the country and the subsequent introduction of Bantu Education in the 1970s made it impossible for parents and learners especially in black communities to have a voice in their education. Authoritarian – top-down – approaches where schools were centrally controlled was applied to the education system. According to Nongubo (2004)

By its very nature and stance the government of the time did not deem it necessary to compromise its top-down approach, particularly since the learners (viewed as ‘trouble makers’) were the ones who had the loudest voice in calling for it (p.14).

Such undemocratic practices coupled with a number of repressive laws could not go by unchallenged. It eventually led to political unrest and tensions between the learners and the authorities. Demonstrations and the boycott of classes countrywide became the order of the day. The popular learner uprising in the history of South Africa is recorded as the Soweto uprising of 1976. This event was caused by the refusal of learners to accept Afrikaans as the medium of instruction in the schools. Historically the language Afrikaans was associated with apartheid. Students therefore found it unacceptable to study in the colonialist’s language as a medium of instruction. Subsequently this led to student demonstrations to air their grievances. These demonstrations were always met by



the wrath of the law and in this particular incident many students were killed. This marked the beginning of student struggle and the following years were characterized by bloodshed, brutality and the expulsion of student leaders from schools.

#### **2.4.2 The PTSAs and PTAs**

The crushing of this resistance did not stop the learners' and parents' demand for a more democratic and participatory education system. According to Nongubo (2004)

During all this time the learners had continued to involve themselves in struggling not only for equity in the education system, but for the recognition both on paper and in practice of their representative organs (p.4).

Due to both internal and international pressure the government agreed to the establishment of the two representative bodies namely the Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) for the secondary schools and the Parent-Teacher Association (PTAs) for the primary school level. For the primary phase the component of students was excluded, presumably because they were considered too young to be involved in school governance issues (Sithole, 1998a, p.41).

It was reported that despite some achievements these bodies had to endure hard times of challenges and setbacks. Though the establishment of these bodies received the nod from the authorities, they still considered them as illegitimate structures. They barely provided support for these structures both emotionally and financially. By the end of 1992 it was reported that there were about 2500 PTSAs in existence. This number according to Sithole (1998a) was not impressive considering there were approximately 23 000 schools in the country (p.42).

Sithole (1998a) also reports that most of the existing PTSAs lacked direction and in most cases members were not clear on how to execute their roles and functions. This could

make the job difficult for the parents because they were open to manipulation and having their role reduced to that of 'rubber stamping'. Schools were also not comfortable with the PTSAs as they saw them as eroding their administrative control; in particular they resisted the involvement of the learners. At the community level the PTSAs again suffered casualties as they received very little recognition from the communities especially in rural areas. Some tribal chiefs were reportedly sceptical of the PTSAs especially the participation of students in school governance. It has also been reported that students expressed concern about an "adult alliance" (i.e. parents and teachers) and at times they felt too intimidated to raise their issues of concern (Sithole, 1998a, p.43).

In short, the PTSAs were not a suitable solution to the problem of how learners could be represented in school governance.

### **2.4.3 Education in the new South Africa**

Following the country's democratic elections in 1994 the African National Congress (ANC) government pledged its unwavering commitment to national reconciliation and to building a just nation for all South Africans. According to the ANC (as cited in Sithole, 1998a)

The new government believes in democratic participation, not only in the development of policy in education, human resources and science and technology, but in the administration and management of institutions in these fields. We are committed to the establishment of relevant structures for such participation (p.75).

According to Nongubo (2004) the years after 1994 witnessed the production of documents that laid the foundation for the educational policies of the government of national unity, especially the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI) produced in collaboration with National Educational Co-coordinating Committee (NECC), the ANC's

Policy Framework for Education and Training document and the Implementation Plan for Education and Training and the South African Schools Act (SASA) (p.14-15).

All the above-mentioned documents, in one way or another, made provision for the democratic participation of all stakeholders in education, including the learners who are the primary beneficiaries of the education system. It is stated very clearly in the South African School Act that:

a representative council of learners (RCL formerly SRC) must be established at every public school enrolling learners in the eighth grade and higher. A Member of Executive Council (MEC) may be notice in the Provincial Gazette, determine guidelines for the establishment, election and functions of RLCs (South Africa. Department of Education [DoE] as quoted in Nongubo, 2004, p.15).

This section of the document clearly grants the learners in secondary schools official status as stakeholders.

Learners were also granted positions in the newly formed governing bodies in the schools. According to Sithole (1998a) the ANC Department of Education recommended governance structures to be called School Boards or PTSAs depending on the school's preference to be established (p.49). These bodies were designed to include a combination of parents, teachers, learners, community members and the principal in an ex-officio position. Whether this equal status guaranteed equal participation remains to be seen.

#### **2.4.4 Student participation in school governance in South African schools**

Unfortunately few studies have been conducted on the role of the participation of learners in school governance and this makes it difficult to make any definite claims. Nongubo's study (2004) questioned the interest of academics in this specific area (p.10). Boyd and Jardine (as quoted in Nongubo, 2004, p.10) also raised their concerns that "student voices

have been lost voices". According to Fleisch and Christie (2004) from the mid 1990's, a number of changes began to have an impact on the students' role in the improvement of the schools. They based their concern on the article published in the Mail & Guardian in June 2, 2000:

The level and intensity of student activism declined, though it remained an important feature of daily life in urban working-class secondary schools. Organised high school student formations lost their *raison d'être* and became a political liability to their former allies. The political organizations to which they were closely aligned in the 1980 have distanced themselves from the student movement because of what they perceived to be its disruptive and anti-social practices (p.105).

This quotation outlines some of the reasons that prompted me to embark on this study. I do not want to assume that these were the reasons for the Committee to Review the Organization, Governance and Funding of Schools appointed by the Minister of Education in 1995 that commissioned Sithole to write a discussion paper on the participation of students in democratic school governance in South Africa. However, it is worth noting that there was always a relationship between the struggle to transform the education system and the wider struggle for political and economic emancipation, in both South Africa and Namibia. It was often the students who were in the forefront of this struggle.

#### **2.4.5 Participation of students explored**

The outcome of the studies I have mentioned earlier in South Africa reveal similar trends regarding the participation of students in school governance. It emerged that students were not fully satisfied with the way their participation was handled. They felt that other stakeholders were not taking them seriously. According to Sithole (1998b) "there is skepticism among students that regardless of what input they give on school policies, their views will be ignored if they are not part of school governance through their RCLs".. Students were also disturbed by the fact that there were some schools where they were

not represented in the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) even if the Act clearly demands this. They saw these bodies as an “unholy adult alliance” where parents wanted to subject students to the same kind of practices they themselves went through during their school days, forgetting that the dynamics and contexts of schooling in their day were different (p.96).

Furthermore the study by Sithole (1998b) reveals that few of the parents felt the dilemma of the students. The students felt that the notion of democratic school governance was the product of the student struggle; they felt it would be unfair to sideline them now. But according to them apartheid had come to an end and the country was enjoying peace and stability. It is for that reason that students should leave the issues of school governance to the elderly people so that they could concentrate on their studies (Sithole, 1998b, p.98-99).

In contrast some of Nongubo’s (2004) findings revealed that though the majority of adults were sceptical about student participation in school governance, some felt that their involvement would contribute to school improvements in one way or another. One Head of Department quoted by Nongubo (2004) revealed his/her appreciation by saying

due to the involvement of learners nowadays I’m beginning to learn that learners themselves can also have ideas that can help in developing the institution, so I would still say involving learners is a good thing even though there is a lot to be done (p.67).

However, Nongubo was critical of the guides for the RCLs drafted by the Department of Education. He said even if the document looked good at face value and paid tribute to the role of students during the apartheid era, it left a lot to be desired (Nongubo, 2004, p.29). He revealed that the guides contained sections that were in a way limiting the full participation of the learners. Amongst these are statements like: “the principal cannot morally or legally hand over the management of the school to anyone; he or she cannot give his or her powers to the learners” (South Africa. DoE as quoted in Nongubo, 2004,



p.31). As a matter of fact the principal was not expected to give his/her power to the learners because of the sensitivity and professionalism involved in the principalship. However, a statement like this one would already label learners as problematic and that in turn gives an impression that they cannot be trusted.

The tone of these statements is therefore a clear indication that even if students are granted equal status as stakeholders there are always some conditions attached to their involvement. According to Nongubo (2004)

... one could then argue that, under these circumstances, learners' participation in governance will of course be minimal and conditional, and the fact that learners do have a say in matters concerning their education could be for somebody else's convenience rather than the learners themselves (p.32).

## 2.5 Namibia: the current state of affairs

In Chapter one I presented the historical background of student involvement in education in Namibia during the apartheid era. I also indicated earlier in this chapter that after 1990 when the country gained independence there have been efforts to transform society in all respects.

Education being a backbone of any country became a priority of the new SWAPO led government. In 1993 the policy document Namibia. MEC, *Toward education for all* was published. The document put forward the plan of the ministry guided by the four goals of education namely **democracy, equity, quality** and **access**. It stated clearly that education in Namibia was for all the people irrespective of age, race, gender or religion. In other words education should be viewed as a right not a privilege.

The notion of equal participation of all stakeholders was also guaranteed by the fact that the country had become a democracy, and the fact that democracy is one of the major goals of education served to strengthen it further. In his call for equal participation of all stakeholders, the first president and the founding father of the Namibian nation Dr Sam Nujoma emphasized this point at an educational conference at Etosha in 1991:

it is my belief that no true reform in education, or in any other area for that matter, can take place without full participation of everyone at grass roots level within the educational communities throughout Namibia (Snyder as cited in Sithole, 1998b, p.104).

However, policies and other documents that emerged as guidelines to educational reform make no mention of the role of students in school governance. Neither *Toward Education For All* nor the Report of the Presidential Commission on Education, Culture and Training of 2004 mention students' participation: students are only referred to in curriculum related issues in terms of how they should work hard to achieve good educational outcomes. However, this is not to say that the issue was not receiving some attention.

After independence the structures that already existed called SRCs continued to function as representative bodies of students country wide in secondary schools. The Namibia. MEC, Education Act No 16 of 2001 came as a move in the right direction. Its section no 60 subsection 1 reads as follows:

Every state secondary school must establish a body of learners to be known as the Learners' Representative Council in accordance with the prescribed guidelines which must determine the composition and duties and functions of such a council (p.33).

Apart from that section there is no other reference to learners in a participatory capacity, nor an explanation of their roles and functions.



### 2.5.1 School Boards

The establishment of School Boards in Namibia was a result of the provision of the Education Act no 16 of 2001 that I referred to earlier. According to Section 16 subsection 1 “there is, for every state school, established a School Board to administer the affairs and promote the development of the school and learners of the school” (p.15). The new government in Namibia felt obliged to involve the community in the structures of decision making in the schools and therefore introducing School Board was an ideal answer. According to Namibia. [MEC] (1993), *Toward Education for All*

schools can meet the needs of communities only if there is a genuine and working partnership between the government and the community. Schools are located in communities to serve them. Communities must therefore be fully involved in the affairs of their schools (p.179-180).

Under the topic *Constitution of School Board*, the Act states that the board would consist of parents, teachers and “in the case of a secondary school, not more than two learners at the school nominated by the LRC”. Ellis also confirmed this representation by saying (as quoted in Sithole, 1998b, p.104) “at secondary level School Boards consisting of elected representatives of parents, teachers and students in equal numbers have been established”.

These School Boards were introduced officially in schools in 2001. In 2004 there were campaigns countrywide to strengthen the existence of the boards and to provide more clarity on their roles and functions. Training was conducted in this regard to equip members with the necessary skills and knowledge they needed for their responsibilities. Unfortunately learners who were elected board members in their LRCs were excluded from these training sessions.

One may conclude that Namibia has taken appropriate first steps to involve learners in governance but little has been done to follow up on these initiatives. The fact that learners have not been included in School Board training suggests that their participation has

perhaps not been taken seriously by the ministry. My findings in Chapter four and five will throw more light on the issue.

In the next section I look at democratic governance through the lens of contemporary leadership approaches which call for active participation of all stakeholders in the education system.

## **2.6 Towards democratic governance**

The notion of democratic participation in educational institutions has increasingly come under the spotlight in policy as well as contemporary management thinking. The spirit of participation is clearly evident in policy documents such as the policy on School Boards referred to above. What is envisaged is a management style which accommodates and encourages broad participation, including teachers, parents, learners and the community. For decades this phenomenon has had the attention of researchers and practitioners in the field of Education Leadership and Management. As a consequence a number of management and leadership theories have developed as a way of suggesting alternatives to traditional authoritarian leadership in schools that typically excludes members not in formal leadership positions. These theories, however, were developed in and for organizational contexts and are not directly applicable to student participation; students are generally not perceived as full organizational members, and their participation is usually limited to representation on the school board.

Nevertheless, leadership theories such as participative and distributed leadership signify a spirit or tendency of openness, sharing and participation, and may therefore be helpful in making sense of student participation in governance.

### **2.6.1 Participative leadership**

Participative leadership is self explanatory. It implies that all members in the organization should take part in decision making. According to Oosthuizen and du Toit (1999)

the shift to participative leadership in the workplace is both inevitable and necessary. It is inevitable because the capacity for participation is widespread and becoming more so. It is necessary because the issues that we face in the workplace are too complex and interdependent to be solved by a few people in authority (p.213).

This quotation is relevant to the school context where the responsibilities of the principals are escalating and becoming impossible to handle single-handedly. Hence there is a need for all stakeholders to share responsibilities in the organization. This sentiment is also echoed by Copland (as cited in Bush, 2003, p.79) that in this model “leadership is embedded in various organizational contexts, not centrally vested in a person or an office”. Even though this approach is designed for the staff in the context, of the school, if learners are involved in the school governance at their level they could also contribute meaningfully to the well being of the school. Taking into consideration that learners would be directly affected by any decision taken, one would argue that it will be more effective if learners were involved from the beginning.

### **2.6.2 Distributed leadership**

Distributed leadership is a relatively new concept and is still in its embryonic stage. It is important to note that distributed leadership should not be confused with the *laissez faire* style of leadership. Under *laissez faire* leadership jobs are simply dispersed and people in the organization do whatever they feel like doing. In this kind of order the leader gives little or no direction at all. Swartz, Kapp and Cawood (1989) described *laissez-faire* or free-rein leadership as:

a super democratic leadership style where the leader virtually disappears from the scene and leads by acting on good faith, by trusting and relying on the individual follower's loyalty and devotion to the cause (p.32).

In distributed leadership the leader remains in charge while at the same time seeing to it that the leadership is shared equally among the members in the organization. According to Spillane et al. (as cited in Harris, 2004, p.11) distributed leadership implies a social distribution of leadership where the leadership is “stretched over the work of a number of individuals where the leadership task is accomplished through the interaction of multiple leaders”. As Woods (2005) puts it:

this means everyone in the school community who exercises initiative which influences other people, stimulates action, change and a sense of direction, and is successful to some degree in the way intended – in other words, all who share in the circulation of initiative (p.107).

In summary, both participative and distributed leadership are approaches where leaders in formal positions share responsibilities with all stakeholders concerned and as a result maximize the human capacity within the organization. Drucker (as quoted in Maxwell 2005) confirmed this sentiment with his statement that “no executive has ever suffered because his subordinates were strong and effective” (p.76).

### **2.6.3 Benefits of the contemporary leadership theories in a school**

A number of benefits are suggested in the literature on schools where contemporary leadership approaches are exercised. It should be kept in mind however that the emerging theories came as a response to an increased demand for better services in organizations.

It has been revealed in many studies that the institutionalization of these leadership approaches has contributed significantly to school improvements and positive educational outcomes. It has lessened the workload of the principal, and created room for people in the organizations to share their knowledge and expertise. It is common knowledge that people possess multiple intelligences and therefore they need to interact in order to tap into each other's resources. This view is echoed by Moos et al. (2003):

In highly complex, knowledge-based organizations everyone's intelligence is needed to help the organization to flex, respond, regroup and retool in the face of unpredictable and sometimes overwhelming demands (p.20).

Very importantly if teachers, learners and parents are involved in the decision making of their school, they are likely to develop a sense of ownership because they feel empowered and valued. As a result of this they work with determination in order to realize their organization's objectives. People tend to implement policies effectively if they have been part of the decision making process. As Savery, Soutar and Dyson (as cited in Bush, 2003, p.79) put it: "people are more likely to accept and implement decisions in which they have participated, particularly where these decisions relate directly to the individual's own job".

It has been observed that in a democratic environment where people work in harmony, there is less frustration and sabotaging of policies. Both teachers and learners at school are motivated; their morale is high because they know they have the power to make things happen. The research done by Silus and Mulford (as cited in Harris, 2002) confirms this:

student outcomes are more likely to improve where leadership sources are shared throughout the school community and where teachers, **learners and parents** [my emphasis] are empowered (p.14)

## **2.7 What are the challenges?**

Despite policy expectations and theoretical support, the notion of student participation remains problematic and perhaps difficult to accomplish. Nongubo's (2004) study has drawn attention to some of the challenges that emerged in his South African research. It emerged from his study that policies were well in place but seemed to be getting little or



no attention by those responsible with their implementation. Uncertainty was observed not only in teachers interviewed in schools but also by the parents regarding the sharing of power with learners. Instead of embracing the idea of having learners as stakeholders in school governance, the move was seen as a threat by those who are in positions of authority.

I do not mean to suggest that my study will necessarily produce similar findings. But, as I conclude this section, it is helpful to be aware of the pitfalls uncovered by other researchers, perhaps as a point of comparison. I return to these matters in Chapters five and six. For now I need to turn to an account of the methodology employed and the research design.

## **Chapter 3 - Methodology**

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter outlines the research methodology and design employed to explore the phenomenon of student participation in school governance.

### **3.2 Research design**

#### **3.2.1 Orientation and approach**

The study is fundamentally qualitative research oriented in the interpretive paradigm. The methodology implies that you as a researcher spend some time in direct personal contact with those being studied, using interviews, observation and other qualitative techniques to understand their experiences, perceptions and their everyday life in their social settings. Neuman (2000) describes the interpretive approach as

the systematic analysis of socially meaningful action through the direct detailed observation of people in natural settings in order to arrive at understanding and interpretations of how people create and maintain their social world (p.71).

Creswell (2003) adds that in qualitative research

The researcher builds a complex, holistic picture, analyses words, reports detailed views of informants, and conducts the study in a natural setting (p.15).

I decided to investigate the perceptions of various role players of student participation in their natural organizational settings, taking cognizance of the guidelines for employing a range of qualitative data collection techniques. As Schostak (2002, p.42) maintains: “no matter how intensively one observes from a distance or close up, to understand the lives of the people who dwell in the houses and walk in the streets, contact has to be made”. I was also guided by Bassey (1999) who observed that

data collected by interpretive researchers are usually richer, in a language sense, than positivist data and because of this quality, the methodology of the interpretive researchers is described as 'qualitative'(p.41)

### **3.2.2 Sampling**

The study took place at three Senior Secondary Schools in the Kavango region in Namibia. Two of the schools were selected on the grounds of convenience. In a small scale study it makes sense to base sampling decisions partly on what is convenient to the researcher and since these schools were near to my home I felt that selecting them would save on both time and money. The third school was in a village some distance from my home but I particularly wanted to include a school that was more rural. In the end it turned out this factor seemed not to influence the findings in any significant way.

My respondents were selected on the basis of their leadership positions. The three principals clearly needed to be interviewed since they were the official leaders of the schools and therefore also of student leadership. Unfortunately one of the principals withdrew from the interview at the last minute, citing work commitments, and I was unable to re-schedule the interview. The LRC chairpersons were, I thought, best placed to provide good answers to my questions. My original intention to interview all three School Board chairpersons had to be revised when I discovered that two of them were newly appointed. I thought their limited experience would make it difficult for them to have views on the topic and finally settled on interviewing only one chairperson.

### **3.3 Gathering data**

This section discusses the methods used to collect data and how the data was later analyzed. I used a multi-method approach to collect data to strengthen the validity of the findings thereby enabling triangulation. According to Cohen and Manion (as cited in Coleman & Briggs, 2002,)

necessarily anticipate the analysis of their documents at a later stage. The contents of the documents are thus not affected by the activities of the researcher (p.318).

I started this exercise with document analysis because I believed that would give me insight into what was happening in the organization. According to McMillan and Schumacher (2001)

documents are abundant in an organization and take many forms: memos, minutes of the meetings, working papers and drafts of proposals are informal documents that provide an internal perspective of the organization (p.451).

Similarly Smith (as cited in Aipinge, 2007, p.36) also commented on the use of official documents when collecting data saying that documents provide:

- An excellent source of information about rationales, purposes and history
- An indication of how people thought about something at a particular time, or under particular conditions
- The language people used to record, communicate, think etc.
- The frequency with which things happened or were discussed
- A potential substitute for activities researchers are unable to observe directly; in some cases documents may be the only source to get certain information or be the only form in which it is available

In this research a number of official documents were consulted in order to give me insight into the role of student leaders in all the three school. These were:

- The minutes of the School Board meetings
- The minutes of the School Management meetings
- The minutes of the LRC meetings
- The constitutions governing the LRCs
- The Education Act

All these documents were accessible and given to me on request by the office of the principal.

### 3.3.2 Interviews

The use of interviews was my primary tool for collecting data in this research. Before entering the field I prepared for the interviews. Firstly I drafted the interview schedule that I cross checked with one of my colleagues. I then decided to pilot the questions with the same colleagues. De Vos et al. (2005) commend piloting as

the researcher will hereby come to grips with some of the practical aspects of establishing access, making contact and conducting the interviews as well as becoming alert to their own level of interviewing skills (p.294)

Smith et al. (as cited in De Vos et al., 2005, p.297) also argue that piloting helps to familiarise the researcher with the questions, so that he or she can “concentrate during the interview on what the participant is saying, and also occasionally monitor the coverage of the scheduled topic.”

I opted to conduct semi-structured interviews with the principals, the LRC’s chairpersons and one of the School Board chairpersons in order to listen to individual views regarding the learners’ role in the school governance. Though interviews are known to be time consuming and exhausting exercises, according to Arksey and Knight (1999, p.37) “in interpretive studies they are considered as naturally powerful as they help respondents to make explicit things that have been implicit”. According to De Vos et al. (2005) “interviews have particular strength, they are a useful way of getting large amounts of data quickly and are an especially effective way of obtaining depth in data” (p.298).

Importantly interviews provide ample opportunity for close verbal interaction with the participants and gaining insight into the phenomenon. Qualitative interviews are described by Rubin & Rubin (2005) as “conversations in which a researcher gently guides the conversational partner in an extended discussion” (p.4). As a result one would have the opportunity to follow up on answers that are unclear or vague (De Vos et al., 2005, p.293).



Interview question with the principals focused on:

- The perception of principals regarding the LRCs
- Their role to strengthen the partnership with learners in leadership
- The benefits and limitations of having LRCs in the schools

The interview questions with the LRC's chairpersons focused on:

- How the LRCs perceived their role
- The challenges experienced in their duties
- Their impact in terms of representing their fellow learners in decision making bodies

The interview questions with the School Board chairperson focused on:

- Their perception of learners' role in school governance
- The challenges they face in partnership with learners
- Their role to strengthen the partnership

All these interviews were tape-recorded with the permission of the participants. Tape-recording interviews are recommended by McMillan and Schumacher (2001) because

tape-recording the interview ensures completeness of the verbal interaction and provides material for reliability checks. These advantages are offset by possible respondent distrust and mechanical failure (p.443).

Apart from the School Board chairperson who was interviewed in the vernacular language namely Rukavango, all the interviews were conducted in English. Since I am proficient in both Rukavango and English this posed no problem for me. Participants were each provided with a copy of the transcript so that they could verify their answers.

### 3.3.3 Observation

Observation, though it has its benefits, might not be an easy option for researchers. According to Nisbet (as quoted in Bell, 2005, p.184) an observer needs extensive background knowledge and understanding and also a capacity for original thinking and the ability to spot significant events. It does however provide the opportunity for the researcher to see and interpret the situation and supplement interpretive data gathered by other techniques. Cohen, Manion and Morrison (2000) explain: "observational data are attractive as they afford the researcher the opportunity to gather 'live' data from 'live' situations" (p.305).

In this research I planned to observe the proceedings of School Board meetings which included two LRCs as members. However, only one school managed to conduct two meetings. In the first meeting that I observed, LRCs were not present. When I approached the School Board chairperson after the meeting to find out whether they had learners in the structure, she answered that they did but they were not allowed to attend meetings where sensitive issues were discussed. The second meeting that was held had the additional budget of the school on the agenda and the learners were allowed to attend. I acknowledge that this placed a limitation on my observation data, but I have nevertheless drawn on all the information I had in order to make sense of the situation.

My main areas of observation were the level of participation of the LRCs and also the way in which their views were handled by the chairperson and other members of the board. By doing this I relied on the advice by De Vos et al. (2005) that in "observation, the researcher relies on careful observation as he or she initially explores several areas of interest at a site, searching for patterns of behavior and relationships" (p.454).

I made observation notes describing the setting and activities observed. This was done with the purpose of comparing data from other techniques to increase the validity of the findings.

### 3.4 Data analysis and report

Data analysis is a process that starts early on in research as ideas of the significant findings will start to emerge while the inquiry is in progress. According to Terre Blanche, Durrheim and Painter (1999)

data gathering in interpretive research is not just a mindless technical exercise, but involves development of ideas and theories about the phenomenon being studied, even as the researcher makes contact with gatekeepers and sets up interviews (p.323).

This proved to be the case, for when I came to the end of the data collection exercise I already had a clear picture of what the report would look like.

I analyzed data collected from documents, interviews and observation using generic qualitative analysis techniques. The data was sorted by grouping emerging ideas and concepts and constantly looking for patterns of similarities and differences and coding them accordingly. Codes are described as “tags or labels for assigning units of meaning to the descriptive or inferential information compiled during the study” (Patton, 2002, p.57). In qualitative research Strauss (as cited in Maxwell, 2005, p.96) emphasizes that “the goal of coding is not to count things but to fracture the data and rearrange them into categories that facilitate comparison between things in the same category.”

After categorizing I reduced the data into sub themes and later into bigger themes. The themes were carefully created by constantly consulting the research question to avoid producing knowledge which was irrelevant to my research goal. I also kept a watchful eye on the data collected from three different techniques to see if they complemented one another. This method of comparing the similarities and differences in data from various techniques is called triangulation. The use of triangulation is justified by Robson (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.49) by arguing that:

Triangulation is an indispensable tool in real world enquiry. It is particularly valuable in the analysis of qualitative data where the

trustworthiness of the data is always a worry. It provides a means of testing one source of information against other sources ... if two sources give the same messages then, to some extent, they cross-validate each other.

### **3.5 Ethical issues in qualitative research**

Social science research, unlike natural science research, can be a very sensitive exercise. This is so simply because the studies to be carried out focus on human beings and the way they relate to one another in their everyday lived experiences in their social settings. It is because of this fact that quite a number of ethical aspects have to be considered when one is conducting social science research. Schwandt (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.54) explained that "the ethics of qualitative inquiry...are concerned with the ethical principles and obligations governing conduct in the field and writing up accounts of fieldwork". In most cases participants are not aware of these ethics and what their rights and privileges are when they are taking part in research. Neuman (2000) warns that the researcher has a moral and professional obligation to adhere to these ethics even in environments where participants are not aware of their rights (p.90).

Considering all these aspects I ensured that all ethical aspects were observed and the environment was conducive and comfortable for the participants to share their experiences. Usher (as cited in Nongubo, 2004) argues that

Gathering information bestows certain obligations on the gatherer and yet they are motivated by conflicting impulses. Their account needs to be credible: that is, it must reflect, refer to, or in some sense illustrate what is happening or has happened, and yet fieldwork is a social activity, which demands a level of trust between the researcher and the researched (p.54).

As it is a normal procedure to make appointments I first informed the Regional office of Education about my programme. After they gave me the go-ahead I informed the two circuit inspectors where the three schools were situated. In the meantime I consulted the

schools to make appointments with the actual participants in the study. De Vos et al. (2005) cautioned that “while the granting of permission by the relevant authority is important, it also lets people on the ground know what the project seeks to accomplish” (p.279).

At the beginning of the interviews I made sure that all respondents were informed of their rights in the research. I made it clear from the beginning that my position as an education officer in the region did not compel them to take part in the research if they felt they did not want to participate. I emphasized that their participation was voluntarily and that they had the right to withdraw at any time if they felt they could not proceed with the research. I pointed out that the information they shared with me would be treated confidentially and that their anonymity was guaranteed. Finally after the interviews were transcribed, member checking was done so that the respondents could verify that their views were authentically recorded.

### **3.6 Validity**

Validity according to Schwandt (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.56) refers to phenomena that are “sound, cogent, well grounded, justifiable or logically correct”. Again Birley and Moreland (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.56) argue that “ensuring validity can be achieved in a number of ways, one of which is to carry out an initial investigation (a pilot study) using any intended data collecting instrument to check the authenticity and relevance of data produced”. I relied on three strategies to ensure the validity of the data collected: piloting, member checking and triangulation. By piloting the interview questions with my colleague as explained earlier I ensured that the questions were in line with the research questions and would test the purpose they were intended for. Collecting data using different techniques enhanced the validity because the findings were constantly cross-checked for similar patterns and varieties. Nongubo (2004) claimed that with triangulation “findings are backed by evidence or warranted, and there are no good grounds for doubting the findings or the evidence, for the findings or the evidence” (p.56).



Member checking of the transcripts by participants to verify their views also enhanced the validity of the data produced; because I could only proceed with the writing of the report if the participants were satisfied with what was recorded.

### **3.7 Conclusion**

The whole process of preparing and collecting data was very exciting and I enjoyed every minute that I spent in the field. Learning how to use different sources to conduct research enriched me with knowledge and skills that facilitated my research and helped it to run smoothly. Interacting with people and listening to their concerns was a wonderful experience. I also learnt that participants were excited to be engaged in the topic regarding the involvement of learners in school governance which they felt was an area neglected by many previous researchers. In the following chapter I present the data collected.

## **Chapter 4 - Presentation of data**

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents the data that emerged from the data gathering methods outlined in Chapter three. Four main categories were used to present my findings on how learners and other stakeholders experience the learners' role in school governance. The dominant data in the chapter are drawn from interviews with the school principals, the chairpersons of LRCs and one of the School Board chairpersons. The three schools are coded A, B and C and the respondents coded similarly. Thus I refer to Principal A and B (C cancelled as explained above), and to LRC chairperson A, B and C. Since there is only one School Board chair (school A) there was no need to apply a code. The data are supported where appropriate through triangulation with the data from document analysis and non-participant observation. Where appropriate the respondents' own words are used in presenting the data. I also include field notes that were taken during observations and from document analysis. The following four categories are used to categorise the data:

- Election to office: procedures and principles
- Operating procedures and structures
- The LRC roles explored
- The challenges

The findings for each category are presented below.

### **4.2 Presentation of findings**

#### **4.2.1 Election to office: procedures and principles**

Since independence the question of electing student representation has been shifted from the school authorities to the learners. Democratic procedures have been put in place for the election of student representatives by learners as well as for establishing the necessary

structures to steer learner involvement in school governance. The need to have student representation in schools is a problem that should be addressed. In this section the school principals, members of the Learners' Representative bodies and the School Board chairperson reflect on the principles that govern the election of student representatives as well as the need for the LRC.

Principal B described the elections as "the democratic process where learners are allowed to elect their fellow learners in leadership." According to the constitution of the LRC at school B (Article 8 section 8.7):

The elections would be conducted on the third term every year and learners at the school nominate learners for election from the two highest grades namely grade 10 and grade 11 classes only. Four learners from each of grade 10 and grade 11 classes are to be nominated (p.9)

Similar procedures were mentioned by principal B:

We normally do it towards the end of the year, third term. The first thing we do is to explain the process to the learners. According to the Act, you find that the last (senior) grades are the ones to participate in the elections. For instance, at our school the grade 10's and the grade 11's are the ones that are taking part in the elections, since the grade 12's cannot take part. They are finishing and the grade 9's actually do not participate, only the last two grades. That is in our case, grade 10 and 11. Each class submits names and these names are put together and then after that a meeting is called whereby learners have to go and motivate. They follow the process of elections as we all know it.

All three LRC chairpersons indicated that these were the formal procedures that followed to put them into power. According to LRC chairperson A:

They select most of those who are capable just ah... mostly those people that are known - that these ones are capable of being leaders, so those ones are elected by the fellow learners in each class. They come up with four people out of each class.

LRC chairperson B also indicated that

The way it takes place at our school is that the learners get a chance to vote for the learners they want to be on the LRC. They make up a list of almost twenty five learners from grade 10 and 11. So from there they elect the one they want to represent them at the school.

It has emerged from the data that the whole process was not left to the learners alone but teachers were involved in an advisory capacity to provide guidance on the process. According to Principal B:

We have what we call student or Learners Representative Council guardian teachers, those who are dealing with the elections and so on. They organize the elections and facilitate the elections and then they will also organize the leadership workshops in liaison with the other colleges or any individuals that are willing to assist the LRC with the leadership.

A similar point was also raised by LRC chairperson A, namely that during elections:

They made up a list of almost twenty five learners from grade 11 and grade 12, so then the list came to the principal. After he checked through the list it went to the teacher who deals with the LRCs stuff.

Gender representation also emerged as an issue. The schools investigated seemed to be trying to make the LRC gender balanced by advising learners during nominations to include female learners. According to LRC chairperson B:

They come up with four people out of each class, so then from those four people two female, two male, and they will compete for one place for a female and one place for a male. I think now it's mostly having to do with gender. It's like you have to make it equal, if the male has to partake in the LRC so the female can also do so.

Similar views were shared by the school principal B:

Amongst the candidates listed, the learners are informed that there should be five or seven male and probably four female. So that there should be at least four and seven or vice versa, depending on the capability of those people. We are just trying to put the gender...at least to have it balanced.

All three schools' structures that I studied indicated that there was a fair if not equal representation of boys and girls in the leadership of the schools.

#### **4.2.1.1 The need for LRCs in schools**

Generally everyone interviewed in this study agreed that student representation in schools was much needed. It was argued that the involvement of learners in school governance would lessen the burden of the workload of the School Management. School principal B said:

It is necessary to have a student representative at school, the reason being to assist with the other related matters that concern the students with teachers. There are matters where the teacher is not needed.

Similar views were shared by Principal C. He said "Nowadays we are talking of the participatory democracy. It is needed and then we feel it is very much important because we also want to listen to the views of the learners". The School Board chairperson interviewed also felt that the participation of learners in school governance was very important. She said "The importance that I see is that learners are the school. If there are no learners there is no school. That's why it is important that they participate because it is their own education".

#### **4.2.2 Operating procedures and structures**

Being a legal structure at school the LRC has to take part in activities concerning the running of the school. The following subcategories indicate the ways in which the LRCs conduct their activities at schools.



#### **4.2.2.1 The structure**

Members have to organize themselves and divide portfolios among themselves as directed by the constitution. Principal B confirmed the importance of these structures: “There should be a chain of how to do these things”. Documentary evidence confirmed the existence of numerous portfolios. In school A’s constitution Article 6 these are listed as follows: Chairperson, vice chairperson, secretary-general, secretary of finance, secretary for sports, secretary for culture, secretary for museum, secretary for school health and social welfare, secretary for buildings, secretary for TADA and drama, secretary for debate and writers club, secretary for environmental affairs, secretary for discipline, secretary for academic affairs and secretary for choir (p.2).

Principal B felt that the distribution of portfolios amongst executive members of the LRC leadership was crucial for learners to know their specific roles. He said:

Because you find that the LRC has responsibilities to carry out at school, but then you find that the responsibility of this specific LRC is done by this one. This one is either inactive and then this one has the responsibility of the other one. For example during the social evening you always find the chairperson is the one to be the DJ always, but there is supposed to be someone specific for entertainment, and so on.

#### **4.2.2.2 Meetings**

Meeting times and frequency varied from school to school. According to the constitution of school A (Article 11 Subsection 11.1.1), the LRC meetings should take place at least twice per term (p.5), while the constitution of school B (Article 8 Subsection 8.2) stipulated that the LRC shall meet at least once a month (p.8). However, in spite of these regulations, it emerged from the data that meetings were conducted when there were issues to be discussed and not necessarily as stipulated in the constitutions. According to LRC chairperson B:

We could meet whenever problems arose which needed to be solved so we have to call a meeting. Later the office gave us advice that we really have to have meetings often - after every Friday. So every Friday we have to have a meeting so that the problems that happen during the week, we have to solve them.

LRC chairperson C also indicated that regular meetings were preferable to waiting for one or two meetings per term. He said:

We meet once a week; we have weekly meetings to discuss what we are going to do. We usually discuss our duties in the LRCs and programmes of learners which we need to deal with. If there are big problems with learners we take them to teachers or we solve them also.

LRC chairperson A similarly claimed that they met if there was something urgent to be planned:

Let me say we have to have events; especially this term we had something to organize of grade 11 and 12 going for a tour. So we want to plan for such things and LRCs have to meet and talk about it.

Principal B also confirmed that even if it was stipulated in the constitution that the LRC meet once per term, meetings were only convened when an urgent matter needed to be discussed. He was unhappy with their apparent inability to find issues to talk about at meetings:

Like this term they only managed to sit twice. I requested them to come up with their own topics, or topics that come from the management. The other meeting was unofficial whereby they just came to the issue I mentioned yesterday.

Principal C similarly felt that LRC members were reluctant to convene meetings and they only met if they were advised by the school authority to do so. He said "For the past two

terms, they did not produce any single minute even though I threatened even to suspend them for not following my instructions. They did not produce any single minute”.

The picture is confusing but what appeared to be happening was that none of the LRCs followed their constitutional directives in terms of regularity and frequency of meetings. They seemed only to meet when the need arose, but even then it was often the school authorities who had to point them to these needs. The principals appeared frustrated that the LRCs lacked the initiative to arrange their own meetings and produce minutes. It may also be, though, that in one case the LRC did in fact have weekly meetings, but these were of an informal kind where no procedures were followed and no minutes taken.

#### **4.2.2.3 The LRC guide**

It emerged from the data that there was no formal LRC guide for schools from the Ministry of Education. As a result there was no uniformity in the way the LRC activities were carried out in schools. The LRCs acted on a constitution that was drafted by the schools but these were outdated and hardly applied. The constitution that was provided to me by school B was dated 2001. LRC chairperson A was unsure whether there was a guide at the school: “There is a book which consists of duties that we have to act on, so mostly we follow that booklet, and to tell the truth we only went through it together once”. LRC chairperson C indicated that at their school they did not have any kind of code of conduct that guided them on their responsibilities.

Both principals agreed that a LRC guide was important so that there was uniformity in implementing policies in schools. Currently there was little uniformity. The LRC constitution for school C indicated that “the LRC will consist of grade 4, 7, 8, 11 and 12 learners” (p.1). According to Principal B:

It is important for the LRC to have a guide because without that one, anybody can play around with them because they do not have that document. And also if it is their own constitution and they are behaving against it then it is easy to call them to order.

Principal A also felt that the guide was a necessity. He felt that in the absence of a national guide at least schools should come up with their own guides drafted by learners themselves. He pointed out that:

When we started we asked the learners when the LRC was elected to come up with a constitution and they could not. These student leaders could not even bring forth this constitution. What we did was to request one from another school and then just adapt it to our situation, so to be honest we (teachers) are the ones that have drafted the constitution and when it comes to amendment, we are the ones that are thinking for the learners actually.

#### **4.2.2.4 The School Board**

Though it is clearly stated in the Namibia. MEC, (2002) *Education Act* that at least two members of the LRC should be included in the composition of the School Board, the findings revealed that this clause was implemented differently in various schools. For instance in school C the LRC chairperson indicated that none of them was a member of the School Board. He said "No not at all, they never come to us and tell us they just held their meetings on their own".

By contrast the two other LRC chairpersons agreed that they had two representatives who sat in the boards' meetings. Both indicated that they found it nerve-racking to sit among the adults where major decisions were taken regarding the governance of the school. LRC chairperson A shared his fears:

We were like shy and so on because it was the first time for us sitting in front of parents, teachers and we were only two learners, but we were told to feel free and we were even told: bring in your ideas, talk.

Both principals interviewed also confirmed the representation of learners in the School Boards. They also shared their concerns about the learners' lack of seriousness when it

came to board meetings. Principal B indicated that mostly when they had meetings the two representatives were nowhere to be found:

You will find that the school board, whenever we sit, you send for them to come. I remember two cases towards the end of last year; we sent for them and only one turned up. So this year we organized the meeting but they were not there.

Principal A similarly said that even if the learners were officially members of the School Board, their voices were hardly heard. He said they tried in meetings to encourage the participation of learners but to no avail:

For instance, we are discussing about the budget, and then what we are supposed to do is the same as in parliament. Because the board meeting is like parliament where learners must say 'no I see that when this money is allocated it does not benefit directly the teaching part' and so on. We don't see these kind of arguments as it was in the past. So it is like they always rely on us to pick up those issues. Now what we are telling them is that they are accountable to their own fellow learners.

The School Board chairperson interviewed confirmed the passiveness of learners in the board meetings that "learners were supposed to present their problems so that we see how we can solve them. What I realized when those kids are coming to the meetings, they don't want to talk". Similarly in the minutes of the School Management held on the 5/02/2007 at school A, a head of department was recorded raising the issue of passiveness of the LRC. He referred to the previous LRC of 2006:

I think that the school must do something at this beginning of the year to tell the LRC what is really their task in the School Board. These learners are very inactive and they cannot come up with any idea of their own unless if they are told to do so. What did the LRC do at this school last year? Nothing. (p.2).

Through observation 2, 10/09/07 at the second board meeting that I attended where learners were also invited I also observed that their level of participation was very low. At times the chairperson had to encourage them to contribute to the discussion. In most of



the previous minutes of the School Board meetings taken that I perused the voice of the learners was hardly detected.

#### **4.2.2.5 The guardian teacher**

The guardian teacher serves as a link between the learners and the rest of the school. Such a teacher is entrusted to co ordinate the activities of the LRC at school. The constitution for school A made provision for that teacher who was referred to a supervisory teacher. According to the constitution, article 7, Section 7.16 on duties and responsibilities, the supervisory teacher shall coordinate the LRC activities in the school. He/she shall be a spokesperson of the LRC in staff meetings (p.4). Similarly the LRC Code of Conduct for school C emphasised that "LRC members should constantly be in communication with their guardian teacher" (p.1). Principal B pointed out that the guardian teacher played a major role in facilitating the LRC starting from the elections and "he/she has to be there throughout their term of office". Principal A felt that learners needed someone close to them with whom they could share some minor issues that did not need to be taken to the principal's office.

That person should be a knowledgeable teacher that can advise the learners especially now that we have teachers that are trained in counseling. There was a time when we were thinking of bringing LRC members into the management discussions but then it was not possible because sometimes we talk of confidential issues. But then we needed someone as the guardian teacher who sometimes would capture some of the information that we were sharing and transform it into something that can accommodate the understanding of the learners. For the past years we have survived with no complaints at our school because of that person.

All the LRC chairpersons interviewed showed confidence in the guardian teachers. "If we have a problem and we cannot get the solution we go to Mr X for advice; only if he is not capable we take it straight to the principal," said the LRC chairperson 1. Similar views shared by the LRC chairperson B:

Our guardian teacher is really helpful; when we asked for training our guardian teacher is the one who organized everything with the Rundu College of Education to come and give us training.

In most minutes of staff and management meetings guardian teachers were quoted as defending the interests of the LRCs.

The guardian teacher for school A was quoted in the staff meeting minutes of 09/06/2005 raising a concern on the recognition of the LRC at school. He suggested that the school could think of introducing a different dress code for the LRC so that they could be differentiated from other learners:

In schools like in the south LRC have a different dressing from ordinary learners. They can put on jackets different from other learners and also name tags and their portfolios. This will make it easy for us teachers to identify them and help us in case like chasing learners into classes, also it will accord them the respect they need from fellow learners too (p.3).

In the management meeting minutes 11/06/2007 of school B the guardian teacher was also quoted as expressing his disappointment in the way LRC were treated by the principal at the school assembly. He felt that LRC were just not ordinary learners to be shouted at in the presence of other learners. He said "those allegations are not even justified; we were supposed to call in those learners and hear from them first instead of humiliating them like that" (p.2).

#### **4.2.3 Their roles explored**

The issue of the learners' role and their participation in the school governance is the main focus of this study. In this section I explore their roles as perceived by themselves and the other stakeholders.

#### 4.2.3.1 Duties and responsibilities

Learners' representatives are regarded as an asset to any school because they lessen the burden of the workload on the school management. Principal A indicated that the LRC were very useful in running the school:

They have their portfolios, so when we take decisions on issues they are always there to give their opinions. Learners at our school could come up with their own *career fair* [a careers evening]; they could do sport, they could do fun runs and I think that is what is benefiting most other schools. And I remember in our days also, you could hardly see a teacher at studies because the learners will be there and they will motivate learners not to make a noise.

Principal B also indicated that the LRC were helpful to school management on issues concerning the running of the school:

LRC are given tasks for instance, the drafting of the programme of the school for activity comes from them. The draft for the assembly whereby learners have to participate in singing or praying, social activities and many others. Supervision of classes is also given to them so that they can also assist together with the supervisory teachers. If there is someone that wants to address the learners the LRC see to it that learners are there on time.

Teachers also felt that the LRC helped to keep discipline amongst learners. In the staff meeting on 09/06/2005 during the preparation of a sport event at school, a female teacher suggested, "we really need the involvement of LRC to keep order at the field. Maybe we can allocate each LRC to a specific playground just to control the movement of the learners at the field" (p.4).

Learners themselves also felt that they were contributing towards the wellbeing of their schools. LRC chairperson C said:

We are involved in campaigns like cleaning up the school and ways to improve the school. At the beginning of the year plants were dying. We decided to come together to discuss it with the learners and the principal to solve the problem. Now the grass is growing. And the rubbish - the school was very dirty and then we decided to talk about it, and now the school is clean.

In the LRC minutes taken on 11/04/07 the members deliberated on the issue of cleaning and beautifying the school and took on the task by dividing the responsibilities amongst themselves for collecting manure, buying seedlings and making transport arrangements.

#### **4.2.3.2 Finances**

Although the school principals indicated that learners were involved in the budgeting of the school finances, learners felt that their involvement in finance issues was very limited. According to Principal B:

Learners have to be informed on how much money we have in the budget. They have to be told this is the situation of the school. So they are asked to bring their requests for their budget so once they bring it we compile it together with all department budgets. Even if you look at votes there are also LRC votes for them.

However, the learners felt that they were not properly consulted when it came to finance issues. LRC chairperson A indicated that they were only given feedback when decisions were already taken. "We don't decide on the budget. The list was already provided in the meeting, so you just have to look at it and see how the money is distributed". The same views were shared by LRC chairperson B: "We are only told together with other fellow learners as a whole school, how the money is used. That is the only way that we get some of the information from the school".

Documents I studied bore out the LRC chairpersons' comments. The minutes of finance meetings for the two schools reflected no input from the LRC.



#### 4.2.3.3 The effectiveness of the LRC

Generally the school principals interviewed felt that learners were not really fulfilling their role. When I asked Principal A to rate the level of participation of the LRC at school he rated them 2 out of 10:

Two in a sense that of course the one is their availability when we are asking them to do something, for instance, you tell them go and stand at the gate they will go. But then if you just keep a low profile and observe what they do, they will allow their friends to come in without dressing properly. So mostly on very important issues concerning the running of the school you have to force them to participate.

The same sentiments were expressed by principal B: "There is up and down in the leadership of the LRC. You find this year you might have a strong LRC and sometimes you find that the chairperson is the worst".

On the other hand the learners felt that they wanted to perform their duties effectively but felt that they were getting little guidance from the school authorities. According to the LRC chairperson C:

We don't really get support from the teachers. It is like mostly we have to think for ourselves on what to do. We don't get that proper support, so everything we do we have to think for ourselves.

The same views were expressed by the principal of school A. In the minutes of a staff meetings of 14/06/2007 the principal is recorded as saying "Teachers need to assist the LRC; they only complain about the LRC behaviour. There are teachers that use abusive language to the LRC and they are reporting these things to Mr X (the guardian teacher). So we are aware of some of those issues" (p.4).



#### **4.2.4 Challenges experienced**

Quite a number of challenges faced by learners regarding their role and participation in school governance were identified. In this section I present the challenges faced by the learners which they perceived as obstacles to executing their functions effectively.

##### **4.2.4.1 Training**

There seemed to be no regional or national training programme in place nor any form of induction to prepare learners for their new responsibilities. However, individual schools sometimes organized workshops at their own expense. For instance school C managed to organize a workshop where all the LRC members went on a week's training outside the region. The LRC chairperson C confirmed this:

Yes we got training in the April holiday; it took place at the Rock Lodge training centre in Okahandja. It was like a team-building exercise and we got training on how to lead other people, how to solve problems and how to work with people as well. We learned how to face obstacles and how to work as a team and bring the team closer together. He taught us how to solve problems and to listen to other people's views and to make decisions.

A letter dated 26/09/2003 was also drafted at this school whereby the principal informed the parents about a weekend training course designed for the learners who were elected as LRCs to be held at the school. It reads:

We plan to have a LRC development course over the weekend of 10-11/10/ 2003. Your child is chosen by his/her peers as a leader; therefore we expect certain abilities and characteristics from him/her. This will be developed in order for the learners to develop and for the school to benefit (p.1)

Principal A felt that such training was necessary for all the schools. He was aware of the training organized by school C because both schools were in the same Cluster Centre (CC). He remarked:

We never had formal training for our LRC except the small introduction on their portfolios and job description. School C did a very good job; they said we are having our grade 11's, let us take them and be trained. Then they went for training. It was very costly for school C to send their learners because they had to pay for all the fifteen learners.

He elaborated by saying that the idea was suggested in their Cluster to group their learners in order to share costs and send their learners for the same training. He recalled that other schools did not take it seriously citing different reasons. "At our school we tried that one and it could not work because, the board said no, it is expenditure without a benefit. It is a waste of money".

Learners in school B became aware that training for them was a prerequisite. According to LRC chairperson B they asked their guardian teacher to liaise with the Rundu College of Education so that SRC students at the college could give them a workshop on their roles as student leaders. "We did request through our guardian teacher if the Rundu College of Education could come and address us and if we could have a workshop then and they came". LRC chairperson 1 indicated that they were promised by the school that they would get training but it never materialized. He remarked that:

I know of a plan when Ms X was planning to take us somewhere for the LRC week. I don't know where, but we were just waiting. We never received that thing. We never went for it. So there was nothing like a workshop.

The training of the LRC was discussed in the board meeting I attended at school A on 10/09/ 2007. It was agreed unanimously in that meeting that funds should be made available for the LRC to be trained. When I interviewed the School Board chairperson after that meeting she agreed that there was a need for the LRC to be trained. She said:

Learners were complaining that they never got training and sometimes they don't know what is expected of them. It is a very good thing because leadership, even if you are born a leader if you find yourself in such a position you still need more training to sharpen your leadership skills. That's why we supported them, we signed money for them so that they get that training.

#### **4.2.4.2 Recognition and decision making**

The findings revealed that learners felt that they were not recognized as partners and in most cases they were not consulted when it came to decision making. The LRC chairperson C remarked that mostly their suggestions were not taken seriously and they were not implemented. He said:

We usually discuss academic issues in the school board but mostly I wouldn't say the stuff we discuss is put into action. We discuss the way to improve that School Board members should visit classes and observe, and it does not really take place.

At school B learners had the same feeling that they were not recognized by the school authorities. At the time I conducted this research at this school the LRC body was in the process of being dissolved because of the disagreements between them and the school management. When questioned whether the LRC was truly to dissolve the LRC chairperson said:

Yes there is a misunderstanding between the LRC structure and the LRC's supervisory teachers because in most cases they want to blame us for some of the things that happen. Things like learners do not want to sit quietly in class and we are not there to supervise.

He continued by saying that they were not consulted on decisions taken at school as a student representative body:

When they meet we are not called; at least if they can call even me as a chairperson and the general secretary just to listen. Some of those things are our rights; we have to be in those meetings. Now it is like we are not regarded as part of the school. Even if they are informing us about the school finance we are only told together with the other fellow learners as a whole school. It is like we are regarded just as ordinary learners.

He added that the reason for their dissolution was that they realized they were no longer useful to the school. They accused the principal of embarrassing them in front of other learners and as a result other learners also lost confidence in them. "It is why we said now things are falling apart because there we are between teachers and learners and the school management".

Principal A also agreed that there was a misconception in understanding the role of learners in the school governance amongst teachers. He remarked that the lack of understanding amongst some stakeholders of the importance of student participation in school governance made it difficult in most cases for the LRC to function effectively. He remarked:

I can be corrected, but I'm sure I'm convinced that not every teacher has gone through, has understood the role, the importance of the learners' leadership. Even during the time we had class captains they were not much involved. You could do a kind of survey to find that no, during their school time they were either not class captain or they were not helping the class captain. They were not even reporting to the class captain. They were not even considering a class captain as an important structure during the time when they were learning. Maybe they were not even in leadership either at church or community. So we got a very big misunderstanding of the role of learners running the school.

#### **4.2.4.3 LRC as 'trouble makers'**

At school B where the LRC was about to dissolve the chairperson of the LRC felt that they were treated as if they were of no value and the school saw them as trouble makers

rather than partners. The reason why they decided to dissolve was that they did not feel needed any more. He elaborated:

In most cases they also want to blame us for some of the things that happen. Things like the learners that are not sitting quietly in class. So they have to blame us - some of us are not there to supervise. They accuse us of just making a noise with our girlfriends; we are also one of those noise makers. So the issue was reported to the principal and then later on the principal raised the matter at morning assembly where everybody was to talk about it. We were not called in. We were embarrassed in front of everybody. Then we felt broken. So we realized we have nothing to do; we have decided to fall apart.

Principal B also reflected on the same event.

Yes they came straight to me and they asked me to apologize and I refused. Because it was reported to my office that the LRC were not sitting where they were supposed to sit in the class. Then you will find that whenever they are sitting they either sit with a girlfriend or other girls and the class will start making a noise. It was investigated and we came to learn that some of those facts were true. And because I regard LRC as other learners it is why I mentioned it at the assembly. So they came up with things. How can I say that in front of the learners? They were a lot; now they came to my office and I said no. How can I apologize if I am doing that even to the teacher if the teacher has done something wrong, why not to the learners?

#### **4.2.4.4 LRC a threat to teachers**

The data also revealed that in some cases teachers were not comfortable with the involvement of learners in school governance. Principal A confirmed that at times he tried to push the LRC to be involved in all issues regarding the running of the school but he never got support from the teachers. He gave an example when he suggested that the exam results be discussed in individual classes by the learners and the teachers concerned:



You'll find teachers will say no, it is not a good idea. It is very bad; learners will talk about teachers. Sometimes during the staff meetings you'll find the teachers want to personalize issues.

He further argued that teachers in general hindered the performance of the LRC at school in one way or the other:

I think difficulties lie with the teachers. Teachers need to be trained to know the importance of all the stakeholders. If teachers understand and acknowledge the importance of these partners, definitely they will transfer this instruction to the learners. They will transfer this knowledge to the learners because they are always close to the learners.

He gave further examples of when class captains were given the task of enquiring at the principal's office if the teacher did not turn up to the class:

Because if the teacher is not in the class then we are wasting the learners' time. Sometimes we take it for granted but may be the learners also care about us, they want to find out about our well being.

But teachers would not take this in a positive light according to the principal. "Sometimes you'll find the teachers come in and confront the principal...that you are talking behind our backs with learners" recalled the principal. Similar sentiments were raised in the minutes of the staff meeting of 20/04/2005 by the teacher who complained "This thing of LRC coming to the office to look for teachers if they did not go to the period is not good. It is like these learners are spying on us teachers" (p.2).

#### **4.2.4.5 Learners' perceptions of the LRC**

The LRC is a student representative body elected to power by the learners themselves. This suggests that learners would have confidence in the LRC and give them their undivided support. However, the data revealed that learners were very sceptical about the LRC and they did not really use their services in the expected manner. It was stated

clearly in the code of conduct for school C that “all needs and suggestions from learners should be channeled through the LRC to the principal via the monthly LRC meetings” (P3). The schools felt that these channels were not followed. Principal A recalled an incident at the school where a group of learners had a complaint about the first language taught at school. Instead of formulating their complaint and channeling it through the LRC they presented it to the register teachers. Principal A explained: “Now you see that they already ignored that structure. They ignored already the LRCs.”

LRC members themselves also felt that their fellow learners were not giving them the necessary support. LRC chairperson B indicated that:

Learners are so ignorant or they just want to challenge the LRC. When you just approach that learner to tell the learner please tuck in your shirt they just say ‘I don’t want to tuck in, you are not a teacher. It’s only a teacher who can tell me to tuck in, not you. You are just a learner like me.’

#### **4.2.4.6 Participation in School Board meetings**

Another concern that was raised, especially by the LRC chairpersons, was that there were some School Board meetings where they were not allowed to participate though this varied from school to school. The issue that was singled out by LRCs chairpersons in Schools A and B as a reason for this was the sensitivity of teacher-learner relationships. But according to chairperson C “So far we did not have any sensitive issues about teacher’s misconduct. And even if they are there we are not informed about it”.

At school B learners were allowed to sit in on board meetings where sensitive issues were being discussed. The principal confirmed:

It is whereby a teacher impregnated a learner. I remember LRC X was there. There is nothing a person can do so they are part and parcel of the School Board, so they just have to participate. But then you’ll find that on their side they just keep quiet when that topic comes in.

The LRC chairperson at the same school confirmed that they were called in to such meetings where sensitive issues were being discussed: "Normally we find it difficult to comment on those things. So we just keep quiet and listen because the parents are talking about their things".

In School A where learners were not allowed to sit in at such meetings the principal referred to the appointment of staff and teacher-learner relationships. He said:

When we do appointments of teachers they are also excluded. Also the misconduct of teachers having relationships with the learners.

Though this was a collective decision by the school not to allow learners in such meetings, the principal felt that it was not a good idea to exclude them. He explained:

The same thing that I told you, we don't acknowledge the importance of the leadership of the learners. We were supposed to discuss everything whether it has to do with good news or bad news, we'll share it together. By the time they get to grade 11 they were supposed to be 17 years old. And 17 years in terms of the law is a mature person. Also they have taken an oath that whatever is discussed here is not to be disclosed outside. But I think 75% is ourselves. We think the involvement of the learners ....they are not ready to be in leadership. Just like when it was during the colonial period when they said blacks were not ready. It was just a theory, an assumption which was not proven.

The School Board chairperson interviewed from the same school confirmed that learners were not allowed to take part in issues that involved teachers. She indicated that:

In most cases like that we ask the kids to excuse themselves. Because learners are just kids. They will not keep it to themselves. They of course will tell others outside about what we are discussing... That's why we just ask them politely to leave because we don't want to say things that are not fit to be heard by kids because kids are just different.

The LRC at the same school confirmed that they were not invited to those meetings but he personally felt it could have been a good thing for them to be allowed to sit in those meetings:

About such issues, let me say I never participated in them yet. But if such a situation comes I will speak my mind... We'll give our points, our ideas and see if it will be taken or not. I don't support teacher-learner relationship and that should come to an end.

In terms of my observation 1, (03/07/07) of the School Board meeting the main topic on the agenda was about teachers at school having affairs with the school learners. I observed that the learners' representatives were not present in that meeting. The members present discussed the issue in strict confidentiality.

### **4.3 Overview**

The picture that emerges is not an encouraging one, though there are signs that some important foundational steps have been put in place for the successful functioning of LRCs. There seems, on the whole, to be widespread acceptance of the need for learner participation in governance. This attitude has to some extent turned into practical steps, such as the open and democratic election procedures and recognition of the importance of organisational structures, such as committees or portfolios. However, what is perhaps the most important ingredient – the notion of mutual trust and recognition as partners in a context of team leadership – is not yet in place. Hence the system is characterised by suspicion, conflict and finger pointing. These issues are pursued further in the next chapter.

## **Chapter 5 - Discussion of findings**

### **5.1 Introduction**

This research set out to answer the research question: How do learners, principals and School Board chairpersons experience the role of the LRC in school governance? Chapter four presented the raw data categorised according to the themes I developed in working through interview, observation and document analysis data. In this chapter, in an effort to address the research question, I interpret and discuss the findings of the study based on these themes. Data are cited where appropriate to help make sense of the findings.

From the data presented in Chapter four several issues demand attention and I have used these as themes in this chapter.

- Firstly the democratic election process that put the LRC into power by voting through secret ballot
- Secondly the perceived importance of having learner leadership structures in schools and the importance of the learners' role in school governance
- Thirdly the issue of the lack of (or uneven) training opportunities for learners for their roles coupled with the absence of national guidelines of what is expected from the LRCs
- Finally the question of how other stakeholders - teachers, parents and learners - perceive the roles and functions of the LRCs as partners

### **5.2 The election process and the organizational structure of the LRC**

The data revealed that the system of student representative leadership has been a feature of secondary schooling for some time, long before the country gained independence. However, the previous structures were not democratically elected and student leaders were imposed on the learners. It is thus acknowledged that former student representation was not duly recognized by learners because they were not mandated 'by the people.' Following the country's independence democracy was introduced as the political system



of choice in all spheres of the lives of the Namibian people. Sithole (1998a) argues that the concept that “democracy is not only about people voting for government once every four or five years, but that people should participate on a daily basis in the decision making process of their lives” (p.47). This is an important comment, drawing attention to the fact that democracy is not simply a procedural step – such as holding democratic elections for appointing leaders – but a mindset based on a set of principles which infuses the way we think and act. A study carried out by Subbiah (2004) in South Africa also revealed that democratic principles became more important especially in schools after the change in government in 1994:

These democratic principles were also put into practice in schools where every role-player has to be part of governance. The most important role-players are official structures such as the department of education, staff members, the parents, the learners and the community members who are assured of being represented in decision-making procedures. Learners are supposed to be the main focus and the most important persons in schools and are therefore included (p.86).

One of the principals interviewed pointed out that LRC structures came into effect right after independence in the wake of the phasing out of the traditional prefect systems that were appointed by the school authorities as learners’ representatives. All participants interviewed in this study concurred that they followed democratic electoral procedures when electing student leaders. According to Subbiah (2004) “The process of selecting learners to become involved in school management or **governance** [emphasis mine] is an important one and should be based on democratic principles” (p.86). Even more encouraging in terms of striving for social justice was the effort schools put into having equal representation of males and females in their structures. Women’s participation in leadership positions has been encouraged in order to redress the cultural stereotype that females are not able to lead. According to a report by the Management Systems Training Programmes (2007) “more women leaders in education would create a situation where society at large would dispel the stereotyped cultural beliefs and attitudes that women cannot be leaders” (p.1). Unfortunately this claim of striving for gender equity could not

be confirmed by my observation. In the School Board meetings I attended representatives of learners were all boys. The LRC chairpersons interviewed - all boys - argued that girls were too reserved and shy to occupy such high positions of leadership. It seems then that while gender equity is achieved when nominations are called for what happens in the actual elections simply perpetuates the stereotype of male dominance in leadership. Perhaps this indicates a lack of commitment to this important principle.

In terms of organisational structure, LRCs organize themselves by distributing portfolios amongst themselves. Suggested portfolios as indicated in the constitution for school A article 6 (p.2) range from office bearers - such as the chairperson and secretary - to specific areas of school activity - such as sport, culture and finance. One of the principals interviewed indicated that there was a need to clarify roles because learners tended to confuse their roles resulting in duplication of effort.. This is sound organizational practice; Cooper and Rousseau (as cited in Nongubo, 2004, p.87-88) stress that "organizations are made up of multiple individuals, with varying roles and perspectives" and therefore "when they have well functioning operational lines of communication, schools are destined to gain more than they might lose".

### **5.3 The importance of having learners' representatives in the school governance**

I indicated earlier in Chapter two that the participation of learners in school governance is a response to the government's call that the education system should embrace all stakeholders. In the policy document Namibia. [MEC], (1993) *Toward Education For All* the ministry emphasized that:

We cannot expect our citizens to contribute to our schools without having a voice in their management and functioning. And we cannot ask our students and their parents to behave responsibly toward community schools unless they also have some responsibility for those schools (p.171).

This statement suggests that schools would only be effective if a sense of ownership was being instilled in stakeholders - including learners - to treat schools as their own. These sentiments are echoed by Subbiah (2004):

Thus learners' involvement in education is a non-negotiable issue. It is compulsory for all schools to have proper structures in place to allow for learner involvement in managing the school (p.86).

He further argued that despite criticism of the involvement of learners in school governance, the move will in the end bring only benefits to teaching and learning as well as the standard of education. The inclusion of learners in school governance is also in line with contemporary leadership theories I discussed earlier in chapter two, particularly the participative and distributed theories. These theories imply that the effectiveness of schools depends on responsibilities being shared by all members in the institutions. According to Neuman and Simmons (2000):

Distributed leadership calls on everyone associated with schools- principals, teachers, school staff members, district personnel, parents, community members, and students- to take responsibility for student achievement and to assume leadership roles in areas in which they are competent and skilled. "Leadership" is no longer seen as a function of age, position, or job title (p.10).

Respondents interviewed in this study supported the participation of learners in school governance. Both principals felt that it was the right of learners to have a say in school affairs. One of the principals elaborated on why learners should be involved in school governance by saying: "nowadays we are talking of the participatory democracy. It is needed and then we feel it is very much important because we also want to listen to the views of the learners".

According to Bush (2003) "certain individuals within the institution have the right to participate in decision making through their membership of committees and working parties" (p.146). 'Membership' in this sense implies being structurally included in the organization, something which the schools seem to realise and work towards. Many

convincing reasons were given by all participants why it was crucial to have learners as part of the school governance. Amongst these, the importance of learners' involvement in school governance to maintain order and discipline was cited most often..

### **5.3.1 LRC a perfect tool for maintaining discipline and order in school**

Poor discipline has been singled out as one of the major contributing factors to poor performance in Namibian schools. Student ill-discipline has made it extremely challenging for the leadership of the school to handle learners. In his research Subbiah (2004) reiterated that "discipline is a problem experienced throughout the world. There is a widespread breakdown in school discipline throughout the world" (p.1). Learners' involvement has been welcomed as a positive gesture in the right direction. All the principals interviewed, the School Board chairperson and the LRC chairpersons felt that the LRCs were a helping hand in most cases because they could be trusted to deal with minor issues especially maintaining order and discipline in a school. The principals indicated that the SMTs and the teaching staff were all too busy to deal with every single problem in the school and student leaders were needed to deal with minor issues that did not necessarily need the attention of the principal or teachers. According to the South Africa. [DoE] (as quoted in Subbiah, 2004):

The body [the LRC] must foster a spirit of mutual respect, good manners and morality amongst learners. Furthermore, they must promote and maintain discipline amongst learners and uphold the general welfare of the school. Learners must be led to develop high ideals of personal conduct, promote orderliness and not disrupt the order in the school (p.6).

Learners themselves felt it was their obligation to be part of school governance and render their assistance to promote the welfare of their schools. They cited a number of projects they had been involved in to uplift the standards of their schools ranging from keeping discipline amongst learners and being involved in maintaining the cleanliness and beautification of their school environment.



What is of concern, though, is that I found no evidence of learners' involvement in major aspects of the school like the academic sphere, school development plans and school finances. Their involvement was exclusively in minor matters, not much different from what was happening in previous student leadership systems: the notion of student leaders being involved in governance seemed not to have been embraced by any of the schools investigated.

### **5.3.2 Measuring the effectiveness of the LRC**

Though the LRC members were expected to lessen the burden of responsibilities in schools, principals and other stakeholders were not entirely satisfied with their performance. Both principals interviewed indicated that student leaders themselves could not design their own programme of operation until they were forced to do so. It emerged from the data that they did not meet regularly as stipulated in their constitutions. In terms of their 'membership' of the organization, attending meetings is clearly an important function. Meetings keep members of the organization up-to-date with issues happening in their environment and, more importantly, as Schmuck and Runkel (1994) argue, "meetings provide an opportunity for participation not found in memos, newsletters, loudspeaker announcements, and the like" (p.183). Boden (as cited in Kelly, White and Rouncefield 2006, p. 47) describes meetings as the "essential mechanism through which organizations create and maintain the practical activity of organizing." Failure to attend meetings thus indicates a serious lack of commitment on the part of the student leaders. One would question whether they were really representing their fellow students. As reported in Chapter four, one of the principals expressed his concern about the LRC's reluctance to convene meetings and their failure to produce minutes. My observation confirmed this: asked to provide me with minutes the LRCs could not produce any record of meetings - except at one school where one very poor set of minutes was produced. It would be fair to conclude that in this respect – maintaining their operational structures – the LRCs were largely ineffective.



But that would be to ignore the views expressed by the learners. They felt that they were trying their level best but getting little support from the school authorities. Further probing, however, revealed what some may have meant by 'level best': a lament of one of the chairpersons recorded in Chapter four is that "mostly we have to think for ourselves on what to do." If the learner leaders are unable to act unless they are told what to do there is clearly something lacking and, easy though it may be simply to blame these particular learners, it may be more helpful to look at structural weaknesses.

### **5.3.3 The need for guidelines and training**

It has emerged from the data that apart from the individual constitutions of the schools - mostly borrowed from other schools and adopted - there were no guidelines for the LRCs to operate on. The availability of guidelines or a code of conduct is a pre-requisite in any organization because it directs members towards the pre-determined goals. According to Nongubo (2004) "having the codes of conduct for RCLs seems to make a difference in how things are done by those involved, as it does with knowing or not knowing their roles in governance" (p.71). Similar views are expressed by Everard and Morris (as cited in Bush, 2003) but they go further, suggesting that guidelines are not enough; schools also need performance standards of some kind:

we believe that all organizations, including educational ones, should be actively managed against goals; in other words, not only should there be a clear sense of direction in which the organization is being steered, but also markers whereby we can assess progress [and] organizational aims ... they keep the organization on the move, heading in a certain direction (p.50).

The absence of concrete policies on the participation of learners in school governance is thus a serious weakness. The fact that these schools are content to copy codes of conduct drafted by other schools also suggests a lack of commitment and seriousness; as Subbiah (2004) cautions, "no two schools are identical" (p.29). The Namibia. [MEC], (2002)

Education Act (no 16 Of 2001) that makes provision for student involvement in school governance through School Boards does not stipulate the roles and functions of learners. As a result schools are left in the dark because of the lack of a national guiding policy. The principals interviewed indicated that they tried to encourage students to draft their own constitution or to be part of a committee tasked with drafting their constitution. This would make sense since "when rule-making involves all interested parties there seems a greater likelihood that they will be more relevant to the situation and the children will have an interest in rule-keeping than rule-breaking" (Wringe as cited in Chinsamy, 1995, p.17). These views are echoed by Schmuck and Runkel (1994) who emphasise that "people who are aware of how decisions are made can participate more effectively in making those that require their aid and that such decisions will more likely be carried out" (p.268). But this important process of shared decision-making has not taken place at these schools and it is perhaps not surprising that there appears to be a lack of ownership of the system on the part of the learner leaders, and a lack of understanding on the part of the teachers.

In the absence of formal guidelines or codes of conduct the problem of LRCs' lack of ownership and commitment is likely to be compounded when no effective and sustained training occurs. At the schools investigated training of learner leaders was not always regarded as a priority. Only School C organised a training session for their learners. The school made considerable financial sacrifices to send their learners on a very expensive trip to get the training. The chairperson of the LRC who participated in this training found it very useful. At another school learners approached their liaison teacher to ask the college of education to give them training. Though this actually happened the learners felt that the training was not adequate: it only lasted for a day and the trainers were not qualified to give such training. They still felt that they needed a professional trainer in the field. At School B the opinion of the school management was that training learner leaders would be "a waste of money."

This short-sighted view of the importance of training is entirely out of step with what literature – and common sense – suggests. Training is essential in any organization

because it equips members with the skills that they need in order to execute their duties with confidence. This study has found the learner leaders to be sorely lacking in initiative, commitment and confidence, and much of this may be attributed to the fact that they are given so little support and training. This finding is, however, not surprising. According to Subbiah (2004):

there is a possibility that there are no such training programs on the market to train learners, such information does not reach schools, or that principals do not convey such information because they think it is not worth training learners (p.36).

Heystek (as quoted in Subbiah, 2004) warns about the danger of not training the student leaders:

Lack of knowledge and skills does not enable learners to make a substantial contribution. Hence if learners receive more training and experience they will be better equipped to contribute positively towards school governance. For learners to become involved in school management, it is vitally important they be trained accordingly. Schools should try and develop programs for leadership training on an ongoing basis to equip all learners to become actively involved in their education (p.110).

Similarly Schmuck and Runkel (1994) advise school authorities to “train students in communication skills, establishing objectives, uncovering and working on conflicts, conducting meetings, solving problems in groups and collecting data” (p.118).

Once-off training is also not sufficient. Heystek (as quoted in Subbiah, 2004, p.101) argues that training should be an ongoing process:

The training of learners should not be seen as a single event aimed at the year in which learners are serving as representatives; training should be given to learner leaders in all grades over a number of years to enable them to grow in the democratic process of participatory decision-making.

It would therefore seem unfair of school authorities to expect learners to work wonders in their job if they have received limited or no training, and one can only concur with Subbiah (2004) that “if learners do not receive proper training and guidance to perform their duties then the whole concept of learner involvement is not likely to be successful” (p.73).

## **5.4 The perception of other stakeholders of the role of LRCs**

The study revealed that teachers and parents were failing in their duty of mentoring and guiding the young leaders in the RCL. In the schools investigated there appeared to be a communication problem and a sense of mistrust by the adults toward learners. In his study of learner leadership in South Africa Nongubo (2004) uncovered similar problems and expressed his concerns as follows:

It would be unfortunate for any organization to experience mistrust among its members, more so in a school situation where there are different levels of operation. The element of mistrust seems to have characterized secondary schools for years, in some cases for obvious reasons, but how does it come about that after many ‘democratic’ policies have been in existence, there is mistrust? (p.99).

### **5.4.1 Lack of recognition as equal stakeholders**

The findings of the study revealed that learners felt they were yet not recognized as equal partners especially by the parents and staff. They felt that even if they had constructive contributions to make, they were not taken seriously because their decisions were never implemented. Literature suggests that it is to be expected in any democratic environment that all members (including learners) demand to be heard. According to Bush (2003):

In education, the pupils and students often demand inputs into the process of decision making, especially where it has a direct influence on their educational experience (p. 138).

Heystek (as cited in Subbiah, 2004, p.33) also supports the recognition of learners in decision making:

Learners are important role-player and must be part of the decision-making process. They wish to articulate their feelings and concerns in a forum with the power to act. They also want to contribute to the decisions that may affect them.

What also emerged in this study is that even where learners were members of the School Board they were only allowed to attend some of the meetings that the adults deemed appropriate. They were not allowed to attend meetings where sensitive issues were being discussed. Examples of sensitive issues mentioned were appointment of staff and intimate, 'unprofessional' teacher-learner relationships. As reported in Chapter four the school board chairperson interviewed regarded the learners as "just kids"; she doubted that they would "keep it to themselves"; she thought there were things "not fit to be heard by kids". This notion was borne out by my observation of meetings where learners were excluded.

This attitude raises questions. One may well argue that this kind of exclusion deprives learners of the opportunity to develop into responsible citizens. According to Darling (as quoted in Chinsamy, 1995, p.19) "where children are seen as silly and immature they will not be given responsibility, and where they are not given responsibility, they are likely to remain silly and immature". While it is perhaps understandable that adults (parents and teachers) find it difficult to include learners (as young adults) in all the affairs of the school one has to ask whether this is not exactly the kind of opportunity schools should be welcoming, both to develop leadership in young leaders and also to show how democracy is indeed a mindset that infuses an organization rather than a procedure or mechanism as argued earlier. Sithole (1995) cautions that:

Democratic school governance emphasizes that decisions must be made on the basis of consultation, collaboration, co- operation,



partnership, mutual trust and participation of all affected parties in the school community (p.107).

These sentiments are echoed by Kantema (2001) who argued that effective schools are “schools which are good at change are characterized by openness of communication skills [and] a widespread desire for collaborative work” (p. 35).

The findings in this study resonate with the findings of similar research conducted by Sithole (1998b) in South Africa where parents made strong statements against learners’ involvement in school governance. They argued that student participation in school affairs was necessary during the liberation struggle of the country but since the country was at peace learners should leave school issues in the hands of the parents because they knew what was right for their children. They argued that it was against their tradition to have children in meetings with their parents:

On cultural and traditional grounds elders do not discuss important issues in the presence of the children. To do so now would tarnish the respect which children must accord their elders, and bring about decay and morass in the traditional value system (p.98).

It is again partly understandable that adults trapped in this conservative mindset would find it difficult to work collaboratively with learners. In this study, though, learners felt that because of this attitude, they could not function freely in such environments. They found it difficult to express their feelings in meetings because at times they felt intimidated by such an “adult alliance” (i.e. parents and teachers). One of the LRC chairpersons revealed his fear when he attended the School Board meeting for the first time: “We were, like, shy and so on because it was the first time for us [to be] sitting in front of parents, teachers and we were only two learners”.

One could argue that the issue of the passiveness of learners in meetings featured in this study could be a result of this attitude. It was reported that in most cases learners -

especially those who were members of the school board - did not contribute meaningfully in discussions. In one meeting that I attended I observed that the chairperson had to encourage learners to participate most of the time. The issue under discussion was the budget for LRC training, an issue the learners interviewed felt was neglected by school authorities. One would therefore expect them to have strong feelings and to express these but they made fewer contributions than I expected. The problem is a complex one as indicated above, learners often feel reticent to express themselves strongly in the company of their teachers and principal. Indeed, expecting learners to participate at the same level as their teachers would be to overlook an important difference. Darling (as quoted in Chinsamy, 1995, p.30) cautioned that:

Teachers are not just older and more experienced than children, they are highly educated thus it will be reasonable to suppose that in discussion they will be more articulate and that they could be more subtly persuasive than most pupils.

In these circumstances learners would need careful mentoring and 'coaching' in terms of how to conduct themselves in meetings and what their role might be. The fact that their participation is so poor could again point to a lack of guidance and mentoring.

#### **5.4.2 Financial matters**

Finance is crucial in any organization. It is difficult for institutions to function properly if there is a shortage of money or if money is unwisely managed. Finance is also a very sensitive issue and transparency has to be exercised to handle financial issues. According to Nongubo (2004):

On many occasions anything that involves money in secondary schools, has proved to be sensitive, but why, one may ask, when there are clear rules and regulations governing the generation, keeping, and use of funds in schools? (p.103).

Apart from government funding these schools also raise money through school development funds and other fundraising activities. Learners - through the LRC - are expected to have a say on how these funds are utilized in terms of catering for the needs of the school.

However, the learners involved in this study indicated that they were not involved in financial matters at their schools in any way. They claimed that they had no idea of what the school funds were used for and were never invited to meetings where the budget was being discussed. As reported in Chapter four the learners interviewed felt excluded from financial management and were not comfortable with the way financial matters were being dealt with in the school. They felt that they should be part and parcel of the school leadership and it was their right to be treated as such. According to Fullan (2000):

Schools that do not welcome students' dialogue do not only violate their right to participation but also deprive them of the opportunity to develop self-knowledge, integrity, good judgment and the ability to deliberate soundly (p.320).

This is similar to an issue raised earlier where learners were reported to be excluded from meetings where sensitive issues were discussed. Clearly 'finance' is also considered a sensitive issue by these schools. As Fullan (2000) points out though, the school loses out in two ways: first, the learners' right to participation is compromised; and second, the learners are denied the right to learn and grow as young leaders.

Principals interviewed on this matter were very defensive. They shifted the blame back to the learners claiming that learners themselves did not show an interest in the topic. They all confirmed that learners were part and parcel of the budget but they tended to keep quiet when such issues were tabled. They reiterated that learners were encouraged to participate and bring their contribution forth. As reported in Chapter four, one of the principals likened meetings to 'parliament' where learners had an equal right to speak and argue their positions. The reality was very different though, again perhaps for reasons discussed earlier. The tendency of various parties 'pointing fingers' at each other has

been dominant in this study and is indicative of the sense of mistrust that prevails. Indeed, in some cases learner leaders are regarded as nothing more than trouble makers, an attitude I explore next.

### **5.4.3 Learners as ‘trouble makers’**

The findings revealed elements of hostility and suspicion in the relationship between the learners and the school authorities. This finding resonates strongly with Nongubo’s (2004) findings and is worth probing at this point.

In one case studied the relationship between the LRC and the principal had deteriorated to the point where the LRC was in the process of dissolving itself. As reported in Chapter four the LRC were aggrieved that the principal had ‘scolded’ them in assembly, in front of all the other learners. They accused the principal of being inconsiderate and causing them embarrassment. As a result learners felt they were not respected or recognized as student leaders and they were left with no option but to dissolve as a council.

The principal, on the other hand, argued that learners were just learners and there was no need to treat the LRC differently from other learners. He felt that learners were ‘just kids’ and there was no reason to call them and to talk to them privately. Both the attitudes of the principal and the learners in this incident clearly show that neither party was prepared to concede ground to make room for proper negotiation to resolve the issue amicably. According to Nongubo (2004):

Without the use of negotiation, the language and tone of communication could hardly be understood, and glaring ‘mistakes’ could be committed along the way if there is no negotiation going on between the two groups in school (p.92).

Similarly Hoy and Miskel (1996) suggest that a situation like this could be avoided by employing and adopting a compromising style, which they refer to as:

a balance between the needs of the organization and those of the individual. The focus of this style is on negotiating, looking for the middle ground, trade-offs, and searching for solutions that are satisfactory or acceptable to both parties (p.198).

It seems unlikely that this level of negotiation can be reached when such deep levels of hostility prevail, and perhaps Buckley (as quoted in Chinsamy, 1995, p.11) is close to the truth when he suggests that teachers are unwilling to accept learners as team members in governance “not because they doubt the resulting good but because they cannot face the change in their traditional position”.

One of the other principals expressed an opposing view. He blamed the teachers for their lack of knowledge and understanding of the role of the LRC, an argument that suggests there has been insufficient advocacy of learner leadership in the education system. The fact that no guidelines for PRCs exist would support this suggestion. The absence of guidelines and advocacy is thus another reason why ignorance and lack of understanding can lead to hostility and finger-pointing. Nongubo (2004) commented that being self critical rather than always blaming the other party is healthy “at least it is positive that self-criticism is sometimes displayed, as this could pave the way for constructive interaction” (p.86). The principal in question here believed that teachers in his school were always suspicious of actions taken by learners. If learners were concerned about the absence of a teacher from the classroom teachers would perceive it as being ‘spied upon’ by the learners. The principal felt that teachers still needed to understand the role of other stakeholders especially learners and learn to live with the fact that the learners had the right to be involved in education especially on matters that affected them directly.

Attitudes like these in a school pose a threat to producing an environment where students are motivated and their self esteem and confidence boosted. Teachers are expected to play a major role in facilitating this growth in their own schools. According to Trafford (as cited in Woods, 2005, p.59) leader *teachers* can influence learning by creating school environment which:



- Treat their pupils with dignity and respect as thinking beings
- Help children to develop the skills of democratic citizenship
- See giving young people a voice as a means both of protecting themselves and of helping their teachers to find the methods and techniques which will enable them to learn in the best way.
- See pupils as potentially more effective students if they are empowered, trusted and allowed to feel safe and able to express themselves freely and responsibly.

In the schools I studied there was little evidence of these attitudes.

#### **5.4.4 Learners sceptical about the LRC**

The struggle for recognition of the LRC does not concern only teachers but surprisingly LRCs reported that they did not always enjoy the support of learners. The findings revealed that learners were sceptical about the student leaders and in most cases ignored the structure and rather 'jumped' to the principals' offices for solution. One LRC chairperson shared his concerns:

Learners are so ignorant or they just want to challenge the LRC. When you just approach that learner to tell the learner please tuck in, they just say 'I don't want to tuck in, you are not a teacher. It's only a teacher who can tell me to tuck in, not you. You are just a learner like me.'

This attitude among learners no doubt has its roots in some of the problems already uncovered in this study. If teachers are uninformed on the role and place of the LRC learners are probably even more so. There is clearly also a lack of communication between the LRC and the student community, an issue also reported on by Nongubo (2004, p.71) who found that learner leaders were not systematically reporting back to the student body on issues discussed at meetings. As discussed earlier in the cases I investigated there was a reluctance to convene even regular meetings, not to mention mass meetings where learners could expect to be updated on the happenings in the school.

## 5.5 Overview

This chapter has shown that the key findings of this study resonate with findings produced by other researchers working in a southern African context. It seems that the notion of learner participation in school governance is received and experienced in similar ways in many contexts where the schooling system has a legacy of segregation and disadvantage and where cultural norms continue to agitate against 'minors' being taken seriously as partners in governance. It is also fair to claim that the learners themselves – equally disadvantaged and denied opportunities to promote self-development and leadership potential – have a limited sense of what it means to occupy leadership positions.

All three cases suggest that schools are happy to buy into the rhetoric of learner leadership and even current leadership thinking, such as distributed leadership. Policies that recommend learner representation are embraced and there is a degree of procedural compliance, such as in the election processes.

But in practice – in the day to day functioning of the LRCs – the absence of meaningful training, clear guidelines and a genuine sense of acceptance on the part of teachers and parents continues to hamper the effective functioning of learner leadership structures. The non-negotiable team leadership elements of mutual respect and trust are absent, and relationships are characterised by finger pointing and suspicion.

The next chapter concludes the study.

## **Chapter 6 - Conclusion**

### **6.1 Introduction**

In this chapter I present the main findings of this study, highlighting the significance and limitations of the study. Finally I make recommendations and provide suggestions for future research.

### **6.2 Summary of findings**

It has transpired from the study that although stakeholders believe that students' participation in school governance is essential their actual participation is minimal and restricted to keeping order and petty cleaning duties. The general sense that emerges is that LRCs are failing, in one case so dramatically that it has dissolved. The reasons for this unfortunate state of affairs are varied.

One of the underlying causes is that the Education Act that makes provision for establishing student representative bodies in Secondary schools is too vague and does not elaborate on the role of students in school governance. Their representation in School Boards is not spelt out. As a result schools are unsure of the role of learners in school governance. In the absence of the formal ministerial document, the schools have initiated the drafting of individual constitutions that serve as a guide for their LRCs. However, apart from the fact that none of the schools seems to have put much time and effort into these (simply copying from each other) it also transpired from the findings that in most cases these constitutions are not adhered to. The principals interviewed indicated a lack of interest from the learners' side because they did not participate in drafting these constitutions. There is therefore little sense of ownership and the constitutions are 'dead' documents.

This lack of ownership and commitment reveals itself in a variety of ways. Principals complain about learners' apathy and reluctance to participate in decision making platforms. Student leaders opt to absent themselves from School Board meetings even if

they are invited. Those who attend remain quiet in the meetings instead of raising their concerns. Even the learners themselves do not recognise the LRC as representative of the school's leadership structure.

In the absence of a commitment to participatory leadership across the leadership structures of the schools – including the learners – there is also a lack of trust and mutual respect. Hence the relationship between staff leadership and the LRCs is characterised by finger pointing. Principals feel that LRCs lack commitment; LRCs lament the absence of training and genuine incorporation into school governance.

The issue of recognition of learners as equal stakeholders was also highlighted during this study. Learners felt that they were being undermined by the adults because they were children. They claimed that they raised issues of importance but were never taken seriously. An example is the representation of students in School Board meetings as stipulated by the Education Act whereby schools may decide whether they have students on these boards or not. In some cases where learners were allowed to attend school board meetings there were some issues that were considered sensitive and learners were asked to absent themselves. As a result learners felt that their intelligence was being questioned and they felt threatened by this “adult alliance”.

The study also noted a lack of information and understanding regarding the role of students in school governance. One of the principals interviewed admitted that there were teachers who lacked information about student representation. These were the individuals who were making the work of the LRCs impossible in the schools. Instead of working in partnership with the learners they regard them as trouble makers and a threat to their positions.

The lack of information on the learners' side can be blamed on the absence of training. The findings revealed that training is considered essential for preparing students for their new leadership roles but very little training actually took place. Financial implications

were mentioned as a stumbling block to have students trained and prepared for leadership positions.

### 6.3 Significance of the study

This study aimed to provide an understanding of how students themselves and other stakeholders perceive the role of students in school governance. The study aimed also to give voice to the students themselves. There is little literature on this issue in Namibia and this study may play a role in encouraging debate and further research on the matter.

In light of contemporary leadership thinking the study aimed to sensitize all stakeholders to the importance of an inclusive leadership approach in their organizations. The incorporation of School Board members in this study was a deliberate decision as I assumed from the beginning that parents knew very little about students' role in school governance. According to Aipinge (2007) "if these **educational** [emphasis mine] goals are to be realized, there should be awareness of current management practices and leadership thinking of stakeholders in education towards change, particularly those at grassroots level" (p.113). All in all the study has shown that having students meaningfully involved school governance could be very beneficial to the school in many ways, specifically in maintaining discipline, a problem that has been singled out as one of the major contributing factors to poor performance in our schools.

Furthermore the findings in this study may assist policy makers in the Ministry of Education to produce a clear framework on how learners could be incorporated in school leadership. So far the schools are paying mere lip service to the idea of students' participation in the governance of the schools. The Ministry needs to make a legislative intervention to ensure the system is up and running to everyone's advantage. Very importantly the study may also serve to instil hope and confidence in students; it was clear that the students who participated in this study did not feel recognized or valued as partners and saw their role in school governance as insignificant.



The study may also trigger debate leading to further studies of this particular phenomenon. This thesis could be a valuable resource for scholars in higher learning institutions especially those in the field of Education and Leadership Management (ELM). The study also comes at a time when Namibia's education system is at the centre of discussion in terms of finding solutions that will make the system a better tool to prepare the nation for the realization of the goals of Vision 2030.

#### **6.4 Limitations of the study**

Every research study has its limitations and this one is no exception. The first is a limitation that applies to all small-scale qualitative studies, namely the fact that statistical generalisation of these findings is not possible. Namibia is a vast country made up of 13 educational regions. The study was limited to only 3 of the 14 Senior Secondary Schools in the Kavango region. This is not to say that readers may not learn something of their own circumstances from these pages. Hopefully the richness of the data presented will provide points for reflection and possible application to other contexts.

My position as an education officer may also have influenced the outcome of the study. It is possible that Principals may have withheld or skewed information perhaps fearing that information might be used against them at regional level. This may also have applied to the student representatives who took part in the study. They could have perceived my coming to school and interviewing them as an opportunity to release their anger and frustration. At times I noticed that issues were exaggerated because they regarded someone from the regional office as their "saviour". While it is difficult to guarantee objectivity on these matters I can claim that my use of multiple data sources militated against taking too strong a view either way, and that the picture that emerged was as balanced and fair as I could produce. Qualitative studies are also by their nature associated with subjectivity and the fact that I was a student leader before independence is a bias I needed to be aware of to avoid compromising the validity of the study

I also regret that because of the time frame of this study not all relevant stakeholders were interviewed. Information from other students who are not members of the LRCs and teachers who are not members of the management could have added an interesting dimension to the study.

## **6.5 Recommendations**

The findings of this study suggest that an inclusive leadership approach in schools should be adopted – especially with a focus on including learners who are supposed to be the centre of the whole education system. The following recommendation may be useful to educational managers and practitioners at all levels.

The Ministry of Education should formulate a formal policy that regulates the roles and functions of students in school governance. Such a document would help learners, school management and parents to understand the rights and responsibilities and avoid unnecessary misunderstanding that normally arise because of the conflicts of roles.

School board members and ordinary teachers should be sensitized and educated on the role of learners so that they see them as partners and not a threat to their positions.

LRCs need dedicated budgets. The study revealed that lack of training contributed greatly to the ineffectiveness of the LRCs. Since schools have such limited budgets the Ministry should signal its support of the crucial issues of developing young leadership by making funds available for training.

The guardian teachers should be carefully appointed and should preferably be teachers who have experience of student leadership. Regional meetings can be arranged for these teachers to get some training on how to deal with students and how to make the LRCs more useful in their schools. These teachers could undergo training so that they could in

turn be responsible for regional training. This would serve to cut costs as individual schools would not have to hire private consultants.

LRCs' roles should be extended to learners at lower grades so that they have the opportunity to learn about leadership as early as possible. After all they have more time left to exercise those skills unlike the senior grades who serve in these positions for only a year or two.

LRC's gatherings should be organized within clusters, regions or at the national level where student leaders meet to share experiences and information on how they can contribute further to the well being of the education system.

The idea of excluding student representatives from some school board meetings seems educationally unsound. This tendency is depriving learners of their right to have their say on major issues and also of their right to leadership development.

There should be a total transparency in the way school finances are handled. LRCs should not only be provided with a budgetary report but rather be involved in the drawing up of the budget from the outset so that they have the opportunity to raise objections when they feel the budget is being unfairly allocated.

## **6.6 Suggestion for further research**

I challenge researchers in the field of ELM to pursue this topic further. The scarcity of literature on this phenomenon does not augur well for the encouragement of contemporary leadership approaches. As Namibia is trying to overhaul its education system with ETSIP and other related programmes in place, students' involvement in school governance could be one solution to our educational problems.

Research should be conducted in many schools and regions including other important role players that this study was unable to include in order to arrive at a broader picture.

## **6.7 Conclusion**

The involvement of learners in school governance is a possible response to the call for embracing all stake holders as suggested by the ministerial policy in education. The fact that learners, who are the primary beneficiaries of education, are not recognized as partners in school governance is quite disturbing. The onus is on all the role players to see to it that the series of challenges that LRCs are facing in schools as revealed in this study are addressed so that learners are accorded the opportunity to make their contribution to their education system.

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