Learners’ democratic involvement in school governing bodies in South Africa: Making the voice of the voiceless heard

Abstract

This is a qualitative study that used interviews and observations undertaken in two provinces of South Africa. The investigation considered the responses of focus groups of parents, educators and school governing bodies (SGBs) in two provinces of South Africa regarding the issues of both the actual or theoretical involvement of learners in SGBs. It considered what barriers exist to learner participation, the key issue of training for learner involvement, and whether SGBs have contributed to the development of democracy in South African schools. The findings suggest that, despite being afforded a full role in school governance by post-apartheid educational policy, learners do not always play their part in school decision-making. While learner participation in SGBs in South Africa offers considerable potential for both school improvement and for contributing to the deepening and consolidation of democracy in South Africa, much work still has to be done.

Keywords

School governance, democracy, learner participation, decision-making

Introduction and background

In recent years a strong argument has been made for democracy as a form of development in itself (Sen, 1999; Walker & Unterhalter, 2007), as well as for providing a better context for other forms of social and economic development (UNDP, 2000: 1-13, 2005: 20-21). Moreover, education has for a long time been assumed to have the potential to play a part in fostering more democratic states and societies (Carr & Hartnett, 1996). While empirical studies vary in the extent to which they support the relationship between education and democratisation (e.g. Lipset, 1959; McMahon, 1999), a key argument is that it is not necessarily formal education per se that might foster more democratic values and behaviours, but that what matters is the nature, structures and process of the education experienced (Harber, 2009).

UNESCO’s 2005 annual EFA Global Monitoring Report focuses on the quality of education. The report discusses, approvingly, UNICEF’s Child-Friendly Schools model as part of a discussion on school improvement, stating:
One implication of reforms driven by school improvement, however, interpreted and applied is greater school autonomy. Such reforms are usually associated with decentralisation. School-based management and leadership are crucial aspects of any reform strategy in which control and responsibility are devolved (UNESCO, 2005: 172-173).

In addition, the report urges that the situation should become “more democratic, allowing teachers and parents to take school-based decisions” – although no mention is made of learners (UNESCO, 2005: 172-173).

Providing a democratic experience at school, and therefore developing democratic values and skills, is impossible in the absence of a certain level of decentralised school autonomy. Such autonomy does not, by any means, guarantee democratic decision-making. However, if power and control is primarily centralised with the Ministry, the province or the local authority schools, head teachers will lack the power to make decisions and, therefore, will have nothing to share with the learners.

Indeed, in terms of debates about the structures and processes of education for democracy, it is increasingly argued that learners should play a role in attaining more democratic forms of distributed leadership, decision-making and policy implementation than at present, as they constitute a major stakeholder group (Cockburn, 2006; Woods, 2005). A considerable amount of international and comparative literature on the democratic involvement of learners in matters affecting their education currently exists, including the many arguments supporting such involvement. In said literature, there is evidence that strongly suggests that listening to pupils, encouraging their participation and giving them more power and responsibility (i.e. greater democratisation) can enhance school effectiveness and facilitate school improvement, as well as contribute to the development of more democratic values ( Trafford, 2003). Mechanisms to involve learners specifically in the governance of schools have been employed in some contexts as a form by means of which to improve decision-making in, and the democratisation of, education (Beane & Apple, 1999; Cox et al., 2010; Mncube & Harber, 2010), as well as in recognition of Article 12 of the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child of 1989:
State parties shall assure to the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right
to express those views freely in all actions affecting the child, the views of the child being
given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child.

Cockburn (2006) found that the learners’ voices are effective when they attend the meetings
proposed, but are even more so when the learners actively take part in shaping the agenda of
the meetings concerned. Further, he devised three definitions of involvement, namely
opportunity – where learners are given the opportunity to attend meetings; attendance –
where learners take up that opportunity; and engagement – whereby learners not only attend,
but are also given a chance to make effective contributions in meetings (Mncube, 2008). In
terms of the functioning of the school governing bodies (SGBs), learners should not only be
there for window-dressing or used in a tokenistic way, but they must take an active part in
such meetings.

However, there are few empirical studies of how more democratic forms of school
governance, particularly the role of learners, are perceived and operationalised by key
participants. The current article is, therefore, concerned with both the use of school
governance structures to help to promote democracy and more specifically with the role of
learners in school governance. It focuses on the educational situation as South Africa, where
related policy has explicitly promoted the use of SGBs and the involvement of learners as an
instrument of democratisation.

**Legislative basis of school governance in South Africa**

In regard to South Africa, in 1996 the newly democratic state of South Africa published a
White Paper on organisation governance and funding of schools (Republic of South Africa,
1996), from which emanated the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA). SASA,
which became operative at the beginning of 1997, mandated that all public state schools in
South Africa must have democratically elected SGBs composed of teachers, non-teaching
staff, parents and learners (in secondary schools). Parents are supposed to be the majority in
the SGBs and the chair of the governing body should come from the parent component.
SASA is regarded as a tool that is aimed at, *inter alia*, redressing past exclusions and
facilitating the necessary transformation to support the ideals of representation and
participation in both the schools and the country (Karlsen, 1999). By establishing SASA, the
state aimed at fostering democratic school governance, and thereby introducing a school
governance structure that involves all the stakeholder groups in active and responsible roles in education in order to promote issues of democracy: tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (South Africa, 1996: 16).

The functions of the SGBs, of which the learners are part, are clearly stated in SASA. Functions include, among others, recommending the appointment of educators and non-educator staff, deciding on the language policy of the school, controlling and maintaining school property, and determining school fees. As members of the SGBs, learner representatives are also required to participate actively in the execution of the functions, which, in most cases, has not necessarily been the case since then.

SASA mandates that secondary school learners, who are members of a representative council of learners (RCL), should be part of school governance through participating in SGBs. Participation by the learners in governance processes was intended to provide the necessary space for them to acquire democratic capacity and leadership skills (see South Africa, 1996). The Department of Education (South Africa. Department of Education, 1999), in providing the Guides for RCLs, outlines the following main functions of RCLs:

a) An RCL acts as an important instrument for liaison and communication.

b) An RCL meets at regular intervals, as determined by its constitution, to consider ideas, suggestions, comments and complaints that it receives from its constituency.

c) After every meeting, an RCL gives feedback to the learners concerned.

Other main functions include drafting the constitution of the RCL, which it must then submit to the SGB for approval, acting as representative of fellow learners in SGBs, and assisting in maintaining order in the school in accordance with the approved school rules. Further, members of the RCL should set a positive example of discipline, loyalty, respect, punctuality, academic thoroughness, morality, cooperation and active participation in school activities; must promote good relations among the learners themselves, and between the learners and staff, the school and the community, and the school and parents. Finally, the members have a duty to promote responsibility and leadership; to support the educational programme of the school; and to maintain and to refine the traditions of the school.
Despite the inclusion of learners in SGBs being a positive step forward, Mncube (2008) contends that their participation is also fraught with difficulties and contestations. He maintains that, in terms of SASA, learner governors should be regarded as full and legitimate members of the SGBs; however, they are often not afforded full opportunity to participate in the making of crucial decisions by the adult members of governing bodies, either directly or indirectly. The implications of the findings of Mncube’s study suggest that spaces should be created in which learners can exercise their right to participate in SGBs to the extent that they can engage fruitfully in deliberations and dialogue dealing with school governance issues. Silencing the voice of learners, Mncube (2008) argues, implicitly or explicitly, means that issues of democracy and social justice are ignored. The tasking of the Provincial Departments of Education with the training of SGB members presents problems if the term of office of learners is only one year, since there is then no continuity in their membership of SGBs. The current study set out to examine the extent to which learners actually participate in SGBs in South Africa and the nature of their participation therein.

**Research design and methods**

The study reported here is qualitative in nature and explores the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in a school in relation to SGBs. The qualitative data in the current study were generated by means of the use of focus group interviews. The interviews concerned capitalised on the communication engaged in between research participants in order to generate data, with the researcher relying on in-group interactions and discussions for the generation of rich data. The rationale for the researchers’ use of focus group interviews was congruent with the contention that the use of said method could facilitate access to people’s knowledge and experiences, and could also be used to examine not only what people think, but also how and why they think in a certain way. The researchers ensured that the number of participants in the groups surveyed fell within the standard range of focus groups, comprising between four to eight research participants.

Four secondary schools were selected for the study from both the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal so that, in all, eight schools were involved. The schools were purposively selected to provide a range of remote rural, rural, township and urban schools in each province, so that views could be obtained from those who had a role to play in schools that varied markedly in terms of their physical condition, facilities, available space, access to social amenities, and local community infrastructure and poverty levels. The rural location of
many schools is an important factor in South African education (Nelson Mandela Foundation, 2005).

The sample surveyed comprised the principals and three focus groups drawn from each school. The focus groups in each school consisted of between four and six parents, between four and six learners, and between four and six educators. Of the sample, two parents, two learners and two educators had to be currently serving on the SGB. Two observations per SGB were conducted in each school.

**Discussion of the findings**

**The involvement of learners in SGBs**

The focus groups were asked whether SGBs have been able to utilise learners in the SGBs effectively. The following are some of the responses that were elicited from respondents. On the whole, the respondents suggested that the involvement of learners in SGBs is working, since, in some schools, learners take part in crucial decision-making, including in relation to the appointment of teachers. Their participation, however, depended on the nature of training to which they had been subject when they were introduced into the SGBs. A focus group from the Western Cape said that the participation of learners in SGBs depends on the nature of the former and also on the amount of empowerment that they were able to access, as:

… we always have very sharp learners from the SRC who end up in the SGB. These learners take an active part during interviews of educators … they are part of the interview panels … (Western Cape SGB 1)

Learners play an active role in the final nomination as well, with “at the end of the day … [having to live with] … whatever choice we have made” (Western Cape SGB 1).

The above-mentioned focus group indicated that, during teacher appointment interviews, learners also ask questions of the interviewees, just as the other interviewers do. They contended that the prospective educators should see from the interviews that the type of learner that is present there is representative of other learners with whom they will have to deal in the classroom situation.
Participants from the focus group also affirmed their belief that the involvement of learners can contribute to the delivery of quality education. One of the educators said that “...Active involvement of learners has always ensured that quality educators reach the classroom at the end of the day” (Western Cape SGB 1).

The findings suggest that, in some schools, learners do participate actively in the SGBs, but doing so depends on the opportunities allowed them and on the training that has been offered to them in terms of empowerment. Some schools, for example, attract very able learners from their RCLs, who work their way up into becoming members of the SGB. The participants from a Cape Town-based school was suggested that learners are particularly active when it comes to appointing educators, because they will be the recipients of what the educators will have to offer to the school. So, at the school in question, the learners’ voice is consistently regarded as important when it comes to the appointment of educators. As had been found with the focus group, during interviews, the learners participate fully, asking questions like the other interviewers, and they also take part in the final decision regarding who is appointed. The school has come to realise that the active involvement of learners helps to ensure that quality educators are appointed to those teaching posts that become available. The above corroborates what Cockburn (2006) refers to as engagement, in terms of which learners not only attend, but are also given a chance to make an effective contribution in meetings.

In addition, learners at some schools take part in the finance committees of the SGBs. Involving learners in financial matters assist the functioning of the school to become more transparent. If learners at schools are aware of the source and destination of funding, schools are likely to have fewer problems with them as far as financial issues are concerned. During the past few decades, schools in South Africa have been subject to much unrest and too many learner boycotts, due to lack of transparency regarding how school finances are used. The latter in most cases, resulted in the vandalism of school property.

Corroborating the above sentiment, one member of a focus group in the Western Cape said the following:

So learners in our school know exactly what is in the budget and when you go to the learners they always assist us in explaining each and every item on the budget – they know what this money is for and where it will be coming from and they will explain to their fellow learners how monies have been budgeted for…(Western Cape SGB 1)
Barriers to learner participation on the SGB

Cultural contradictions and learner participation

Although the implementation of SGBs was meant to democratise schools, sometimes there is a contradiction between Western and African traditions of democracy, with the latter having an impact on learner participation. The literature is replete with Western democratic ideals, with relatively little having been written on African democracy and what has been written has been largely allied with Western values (Ezeanyika, 2011). However, Fayemi (2009: 114) posits that “democracy is culturally relative”, implying that democracies tend to vary among different societies. One can thus speak of Athenian democracy, Islamic democracy, American democracy and African democracy, among other forms of democracy. Democratic principles like respect, accountability and equality are universal – “what differs are the democratic practices in different cultural and political societies” (Fayemi, 2009: 115).

Mariam (2010) contends that African democracy has its origins in African culture and history and the uniqueness of African democracy lies in the fact that it mirrors the sociocultural realities of the country in which it is present (Ake, 1993). Further, Ake (1993: 243) explains that, “Africa is still a communal society… People participate… because they are part of an interconnected whole”. Such a link between the individual and the group articulates the distinctive communal characteristic of African society. The emphasis on the group, rather than on the individual, resonates with the African notion of Ubuntu (Humanity) that views the self in relation to others (Zuern, 2009).

Lane, Hart and Steven (2001: 13), in their description of democracy in Africa, argue that generally within a clan, village or tribe there is “consultation, discussion and consensus where it is achievable or consent where it is not”. Nyerere (1997: 156) describes the traditional African democracy as a phenomenon in terms of which “elders sit under the big tree and talk until they agree”. He contends that this ‘talking until you agree’ is an important point in understanding the traditional African concept of democracy. Hence, the prior descriptions point towards local participatory democracy, as opposed to the representative form of democracy that takes place in SGBs. Moreover, the notion of joint action, free discussion and dialogue, as well as decision-making by consensus, is accentuated. Similarly, such aspects are necessary for SGBs to function effectively as democratic structures.
However, the findings suggest the contrary where learners do not engage fruitfully in free discussions and dialogue. However, the fact that, in terms of African democracy, only elders sit under a tree points to the absence of representative elections, restrictions in participation and to the exclusion of learners from such deliberations, and is, therefore, not consistent with Western notions of democracy that underpin both SASA and the SGBs.

As discussed above, the benefits of learner involvement do not apply equally across all schools. In some schools, learners’ voices are not as respected as in certain others. The disparity between schools was also clearly observed – rural schools were found not to encourage learner participation as much as did former Model C schools. There is increasing recognition of the importance of culture in the operation of education (Stephens, 2007), and culture can play a negative role in learner participation in SGBs. In one of the author’s experiences and opinion, black children in South Africa have often been socialised in such a way that they capable of neither communicating nor deliberating effectively with adults. Their incapacity to do so has been construed as a sign of respect, with the quieter a child is in front of an adult being taken as the more respectful the former is of the latter.

One chair of governors said the following:
Learners’ participation is not always as vocal as one would have wanted to, simply because … learners find it very difficult in talking in the midst of adults … Learners do not have the time to sacrifice to be at meetings … as such they get left out along the way … their contribution is often questioned … as to whether it is relevant. (Chair of governors from Western Cape SGB 2)

The last point made in the above quote corroborates what Young (2000) suggests. She speaks of two types of inclusion – external and internal. In the former, some individuals are kept out of debates or decision-making processes, whereas in the latter those who are normally included in the group are excluded from it, due to their interaction privileges, language issues, and/or participation being treated as irrelevant (Mncube, 2007; Mncube, Harber & Du Plessis, 2011; Young, 2000).

The above quotation is from a school that was dominated by Afrikaans-speaking coloured learners, but the findings are similar to the one made in relation to a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal, where learners were found to have insufficient freedom to be able to present their
views in the midst of adults, but felt that they had to request teachers to speak on their behalf in SGB meetings. The fear that some learners have of talking in the presence of adults is believed to be perpetuated by the use of traditional teacher-centred teaching methods. In addition, African democracy and culture also has a negative effect on learner participation in SGBs. In regard to the traditional teaching methods, teachers and learners have been socialised to a ‘banking concept’ of learning (Freire, 1970) in ways that the teacher (or other adult) is the only one who is supposed to do the talking, performing the role of instructor as one who has to ‘pour’ the learning content into learners, whose job it is just to listen to the teacher. It may be for the reason identified that some learner representatives on SGBs are inclined to ask their teachers to present their discussion points at meetings of the SGB, whereas, in fact, they should present them themselves. As one learner in KZN focus group 1 put it, “No … ma’am, you should say this for me”. The same focus group of teachers elaborated on the above point, saying the following:

The real issue here or the cause is the culture … the African culture says when adult people are meeting on a particular issue, there shouldn’t be children sitting around there … when the children are invited to the meetings with the adults in the governing body where there are teachers and learners, their culture says they have to respect their teachers and parents. (KZN Focus group 1)

Learners tend to be very shy and to find it very difficult to express themselves about any issue, because they feel that, if they were to do something, they might insult their elders if they tell them how they feel about a particular matter. Although SASA motivates for learners to participate in SGBs, the traditional African culture makes it difficult for learners to air their views. For example, one of the educators surveyed said:

There is no one amongst the SGB members who says to them you shouldn’t say anything – but it becomes automatic that they become silence [sic] in the midst of adults.

(Educator from KZN focus group 1)

The findings from the focus group interviews were also corroborated by observations that were made of learners in some rural schools who were found to remain silent and to sit back from a discussion in most cases. In most cases learners would wait until they are instructed by the chair of school governing bodies or the school principal. In another instance as indicated elsewhere in the paper learners would ask the teachers to speak on their behalf. This
is not uncommon in the African culture where it is normal for example that when children need something from their parents, they have to ask mothers to present their requests to fathers.

**Socio-economic status (SES)**

SES was also found to be a factor preventing learners from effectively participating in the SGBs. Learners whose parents had not paid school fees were found to be less active and to be afraid to take part in deliberations of the SGBs, particularly during the meetings of the finance committees. As one principal in an SGB in the Western Cape put it:

… where the discussion is about the learners who did not pay school fees … now the learners in the SGB are immediately intimidated, because either his parent didn’t pay or the majority of his class didn’t pay...the learner is now going to be very silent if he knows that his parents didn’t pay.

(Principal from Western Cape SGB)

The findings also suggest that it takes more time and effort to encourage learners to speak in SGBs, as “... so much more time is spent in trying to get the opinion of what the learner feels about” (a principal from Western Cape SGB 2). The observations made regarding SGB meetings also revealed that learners did not fully utilise the opportunities to participate that were given to them. This is in line with the above sentiment where learners across both provinces were seen to be reluctant to participate. It begs the question of what happened to those learners who would be on strike, boycotting classes because they wanted to be presented in school governance matters.

**The role of the school principal in promoting learner participation**

The findings of the study conducted by Mncube (2009: 29) highlighted the important functions that principals fulfil with regard to the functioning of the SGB. Principals are viewed by governors as playing a positive role in SGBs, with the former being referred to as ‘the finger on the pulse of what is happening at school’. Principals also serve as resource persons for other members of the SGBs and as ‘the engines’ of the schools. Furthermore, principals have the responsibility of ensuring the maximum participation of both parent and learner governors in SGB meetings. However, the findings also highlighted the persistent power struggles that may arise in rural schools when principals overplay their roles, as them doing so creates tension among SGB members. In a nutshell, principals should enable the
implementation of such democratic values as tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making in schools through the leadership roles that they fulfil (Mncube, 2009).

In other SGB focus groups, and reflecting the concerns discussed in the literature reviewed earlier (Joorst, 2007; Mncube, 2008; Young, 2000), it was found that some SGBs exercised internal exclusions, by not fully involving even those learners who were members of the SGBs. For example, a KwaZulu-Natal-based principal contended the following:

In many instances, principals will chair. The SGB chairperson is only there for issues of formality; otherwise, the principal will act as the one who is running the SGB.

The above contention suggests that SGBs function well if all members are actively included and involved through the establishment of SGB subcommittees. They should all be given opportunities to chair the meetings of the subcommittees, so that they can come to feel involved in them (Principal of Hluhluwe SGB 2, KZN).

The domination of school principals in SGBs is also highlighted in the following statement: SGBs are formed by parents, teachers as well as the learners, however, most suggestions or opinions and decisions are made by the principal of the school … no suggestions come from parents and learners … the principal is the decision-maker; parents and learners are not given a voice.

(KZN focus group 2)

The above quote highlights how learners become excluded from the functioning of SGBs. Even though learners might gain access to information pertaining to certain issues, it is only the principal who has the final say on such matters. The principal is the one to choose on which idea he intends to follow through. The above contention concurs with those who view SGBs as being fraught with social tension, rejection, domination, psychological stress and power struggles (Brown & Duku, 2008; Mncube, 2007).

One of the functions of the SGBs is to recommend the appointment of educators, but in a focus group in KZN, it was sais that, in reality, the school principal is the one who tends to appoint them (Joorst, 2007). One of the educators said:
The South African Schools Act says that the teacher can be appointed by the SGB, here at school the teacher is just appointed by the principal … he just picks up a phone and phones the teacher to come to school without consulting any other member of the SGB. (Educator from KZN focus group 2)

In another focus group in KwaZulu-Natal, a further educator said:
If it has to do with interviews [of the appointment of educators], learners can’t be part … it’s beyond them – I mean … they can’t cope generally … they can’t come up with something. (Educator from KZN focus group 1)

Thus, while SASA states that SGBs are endowed with the role of recommending the appointment of teachers, amongst other things, the above quotations suggest that, in some cases, the task is, in reality, more of the responsibility of the principal. However, it is also worth noting that the context in which the schools operate matters. Learner involvement varies from school to school, and also from province to province. For example, learners in the Western Cape were found to be taking part even in finance committees, which was not the case with most schools (which tended to be in the more rural areas), in the sample from KwaZulu-Natal.

**Power relations in SGBs**

In a study that was conducted by Mncube and Naicker (2011), while the majority of respondents were found to be of the opinion that SGBs contribute to the maintenance of a democracy, a minority of participants were of the view that their SGBs did not promote democracy, but instead positioned the principal in the most powerful position. One of the major reasons advanced for such undermining of democracy lay in the power of the principal. A participant accordingly declared:
You often find when personalities are very powerful … [They] take away that democratic right that is [elsewhere] given to everybody.

(Principal from KZN focus group 2)
Another participant from the same school remarked, regarding the unilateral decision-making that was undertaken by the principal, “There are no suggestions from different stakeholders … nothing … decisions are taken by the principal” (Educator from KZN focus group).
The issue of the power of principals to hinder democratic practices is not new to schooling. Mncube (2009) confirms that power relations affect school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and are bound to play a role in affecting stakeholder participation in governance. Principals sometimes use their status to place themselves at the forefront of decision-making (Mncube, 2009).

Fataar (2008: 22) observes that “… the SGBs have become a prime site for principals to establish a platform for their authoritative performances”. He notes that, in some schools, instead of other stakeholders exercising sovereign power in making decisions in the SGBs, the principals are the ones to reign over the governance process (Mncube & Naicker, 2011).

Observations of SGBs and schools confirmed that, very often, school principals, due to their positions of power in schools, tend to manipulate the SGB to function in a way that suits them (Joorst, 2007). As such, learner participation in SGBs is determined by what teachers and principals view as being appropriate. The consequent compromising of learner involvement is criticised by many writers (Joorst, 2007; Mncube, 2001, 2008; Young, 2000). Young (2000: 6) takes the issue further, warning that the challenge to inclusion requires deeper conditions than mere “nominal voting rights”, but must attend to such issues as modes of communicating and social difference. Mncube, Harber and Du Plessis (2011) cite Young (2000), who contends that democratic norms mandate inclusion as a criterion of political legitimacy. The researchers state a state of true democracy implies that all members of an organisation be included equally in the decision-making process, so that any decisions that are made should be considered by all as being legitimate (Mncube et al., 2011).

**Lack of training as a barrier to learner participation**

The issue of the lack of training arose throughout the interviews as a hindrance to learner participation, with the following being a typical statement in this regard:

… Involvement of learners is not working but … we shouldn’t exclude them. I still feel the need to include them, because there are issues that affect learners … I think they need training on how to participate when they are in meetings … when they are involved with adult people in a meeting where you are equal partners … (Teacher from KZN focus group 1)
The findings made in the current study suggest that learners lack skills for how to participate when they are involved in meetings with adults. There is, therefore, a need to reconcile African culture and Western culture during training sessions if learners are to participate effectively in SGBs. The most common and simple contradiction between the behaviour that is required by each of the two cultures, for example, is that, in African culture, when a child speaks to an adult, the former does not have to look the latter in the eye, while Western culture demands eye contact between the two.

As the lack of training in SGB practice emerged as a key point from the interviews, the current section of the paper considers such training as a way by means of which effective learner involvement can be obtained in SGBs. Davies, Harber and Schweisfurth (2002, 2005), Trafford (2003), and Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000) have all also noted the importance of preparatory training in the successful implementation of more democratic forms of school organisation and governance than have been practised in the past. Welgemoed (1998) identified the training of learners as being key to the successful implementation of democratic structures in South African schools. In the current study, the focus groups were asked whether learners were sufficiently trained to form part of SGBs, to which various respondents opined differently. In general, learners who are in the SGBs were found to have been trained to some extent, but insufficiently, with much more still requiring to be done. On joining the SGB, the members were provided with once-off training, which was perceived as being relatively unhelpful. The present findings suggest that SGBs, of which learners are a part, should be provided with such training on an ongoing basis. The learners concerned should also be encouraged to attend as many workshops as possible, on such issues as financial management, shortlisting for interviews and education laws, among others. Their attendance should help to develop their skills, which they could also use after leaving the school and which they could also pass on to new potential learner members of SGBs. A principal from an SGB in KwaZulu-Natal argued that the training offered by the Department of Education is insufficient for current and future needs:

The training that learners get from the Department is a once-off … and they never get any ongoing training … learners need to be developed on an ongoing basis.

(Principal from KZN SGB 2)
The Department of Education (1997) contends that capacity-building is a major requirement for South African SGBs. In addition, Ngidi (2004) maintains that providing training programmes for the members of SGBs could play an important role in the operation of such bodies, by improving their awareness regarding curriculum-related activities. In addition, Tsotetsi et al. (2008) indicate that there is a need for training of the participants in SGBs in order to enable such bodies to function efficiently. Training might help to circumvent the problem caused by the conflict of roles between school governors and school management teams that several authors describe (Heystek, 2004; Mncube, 2005).

The empowerment of school-level governing bodies is one of the major requirements for SGBs to operate effectively and so that the institutions concerned can deliver what is expected of them. This is particularly true for countries like South Africa, where, in the past, there was no tradition of political participation for most of the population for centuries. The evidence from England and elsewhere suggests that training is essential if governing bodies are to achieve the objectives set for them. Capacity-building is particularly important for developing countries, to which South Africa is no exception (Bush & Heystek, 2003; Department of Education, 1997).

**Democracy and the role of learners on SGBs**

The devolution of power to the local level was aimed at furthering democracy and at making schools more effective and accountable. To implement the practice, SASA mandated that all public schools in South Africa must have democratically elected SGBs, comprised of the principal (in his/her official capacity), educators, non-teaching staff, parents and learners (in secondary schools). Such reform was intended to foster tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making.

Bush and Heystek (2003) maintain that there has been a major shift towards self-governance for schools in many countries during the past two decades. However, there has been a considerable amount of diversity in the forms of self-governance adopted in the countries concerned, despite school governance being generally underpinned by notions of democracy and school effectiveness. The researchers in question maintain that power is typically devolved to school-level governing bodies, while operational management is the
responsibility of the principal in each instance (Bush & Gamage, 2001; Bush & Heystek, 2003).

Governance is believed to be one dimension that would contribute to the democratisation of schools and the country at large. In the same vein, the South African government clearly links governance to wider democratic objectives in its advice to school governors:
Just like the country has a government, the school that your child and other children in the community attend needs a ‘government’ to serve the school and the school community. (Department of Education, 1997: 2)

Although few governments link SGBs to democracy in such a direct manner, the underlying philosophy generally relates to a view that stakeholder participation is likely to be beneficial for the school and its pupils, as well as for the community it serves (Bush & Gamage, 2001: 39; Bush & Heystek, 2003). In addition, the Ministerial Review Committee (Ministerial Review Committee, 2004: 82) found that SGBs have a unifying effect in schools, enabling all stakeholders to cooperate with one another, regardless of their status, age, gender and religious affiliations.

There is international evidence that the experience of democratic structures and processes in schools can help schools to be more effective and to develop more democratic young people (Harber & Mncube, 2010). The respondents were asked whether SGBs contribute to developing democracy in South African schools. The general opinion was found to be that they do, but not to the fullest extent possible, due to the lack of training or induction into the role that SGB members need to play, so that such bodies are unable to function effectively at present. The potential role of SGBs in promoting democracy is well captured in the following statement by one of the principals participating in the current study:
SGBs are by its [i.e. their] own right democratic institutions – there is representation of all stakeholders – learners, teaching and non-teaching staff … all the stakeholders have a voice in terms of governance of the school.

(Principal from Western Cape SGB 2)

In contrast to the above, a principal in another focus group said the following:
The very composition of the school governing body should be rendering democracy in the school because all stakeholders are represented ... But again, if learners do not participate in
meetings, what does democracy really mean to them? … The very few teachers that are in the governing body because they’ve got the know-how, they can easily influence and manipulate the processes ...

(Principal from Western Cape SGB 1)

Some focus groups noted that, although SGBs are supposed to be democratic, in most cases democracy does not exist in practice. For example, one teacher from another focus group indicated:

In our school there is no democratic participation of all members … not all stakeholders are given a chance to air their views … but all decisions are taken by the principal ... In my view, SGB[s] need to be trained in order to operate along democratic lines. (Teacher from KZN focus group 3)

The teacher quoted above is from a school in a rural context. However, it was interesting to note that even schools in similar contexts tend to have differing views in terms of operation of the SGBs. For example, another teacher in a focus group from a rural setting said the following:

The SGB does contribute to developing democracy; for example, learners in most schools take part in [the] functioning of the school – they exercise their democratic right to air their views about what they would like or about the obstacles that are there. (Teacher from KZN focus group 1)
Discussion and Conclusion
Cultural values and practices can present barriers to be overcome in achieving more democratic practices. Writing on Namibia, O’Sullivan (2004: 595), for example, writes that: Learner-centred approaches were developed in the West and are appropriate to the Western focus on the individual. This raises questions about their potential relevance in developing country societies. In many of these societies, including the case study district, the interests of the individual tends to be subsumed under [those of] the group.

A common obstacle to attaining greater participation by young people in their schooling than they have had in the past in many cultures is the adult view of the role of the child in society, Chiwela (2010: 66) wrote of Zambian society: “Cultural attitude – children are brought up to believe that they should remain silent in the presence of adults. Hence the child may be hesitant to speak, while the adult is uncomfortable with the child who expresses an opinion.”

Similarly, Altinyelken (2010: 167) wrote: “…in traditional Ugandan culture, children are brought up to respect adults and those in authority. Questioning or challenging them are [sic] not often considered appropriate behaviour.”

The above study has found similar issues facing learner participation in SGBs in South Africa. However, while culture can be a barrier to change in education, it can also be directed in a more democratic direction by means of educational efforts. It is important to remember that culture is neither completely homogenous, nor fixed for all time, and that culture has the capacity for adaption and change. Clarke and Otaky (2006: 120) expressed the situation as follows:

… Culture can be usefully understood as a never-finished site of competing historical and social discourses rather than as a received set of beliefs and values. We wish to emphasise the ‘given and the possible’ rather than just the ‘given’ in order to resist what we see as another form of cultural imperialism. We advocate a view of reflection as a human capacity akin to our abilities to create and use language and other ‘tools of the mind’, even though the particular forms it take will inevitably be shaped by historical, cultural and social factors.

Thus, just because traditional African culture may be a barrier to greater and more meaningful pupil participation at present, does not meant that there is anything fixed or
immutable in the situation. However, change in such culture will mean more, and perhaps more challenging, education and training for all participants, with such added impetus going beyond the technicalities of SGBs to critically examine culture, identities, roles and power relationships as well.

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Learners’ democratic involvement in school governing bodies in South Africa: Making the voice of the voiceless heard


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