

Learner Representative Council (LRC) voice and leadership in a newly established school in Namibia

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Abstract

A case study was conducted to explore learner voice and leadership development within a structure of Learner Representative Council (LRC) at a newly established school in the Erongo Region in Namibia. Interpretive methods were used in the study which was set to gather participants' understanding of the phenomenon of learner voice and leadership in the school, leadership development opportunities existed in the school and factors constraining the development of LRC voice and leadership in a newly established school. Distributed leadership theory was used as the conceptual framework of the study. Participants for this study were purposively chosen to provide researcher with sufficient information to answer the research questions because case-study research often involves a smaller sample size. Thirteen LRC members, three LRC guardian teachers, one Head of Department (HoD) and one school principal were the participants of the study. Data was generated through document analysis, individual interviews, questionnaires and observations. Documents such as, the Educational Act of 2001, School Development Plan [SDP] of 2008, Regulations made under Educational Act of 2001 were used to gather and triangulate information, specifically on how learner leadership was promoted in the policy documents.

Individual interviews were conducted with the HoD who was the former acting principal, the principal, and one LRC guardian teacher to find out their understanding of learner leadership in the school, as well as leadership development opportunities for the LRC. Questionnaires were administered to the 13 LRC members and the 2 LRC guardian teachers. This was done to understand the current condition of leadership development opportunities for the LRC in the school. To get a holistic picture of LRC voice and leadership in the school, observation was also very useful in this study because it enabled the researcher; during the eight-week period the researcher spent in the school, to look afresh at everyday behaviour that otherwise might be taken for granted. Data generated were inductively analysed using content analysis. Data revealed that learner leadership was largely understood as managerial roles carried out by the LRC in the school. Unlike many schools in Namibia, this case-study school offered numerous leadership development opportunities for the LRC. The community networking events such as: School Exchange Programmes, Town Council breakfast and Junior Regional Council, were opportunities offered to the LRC to solicit information, exchange ideas and discuss matters of common interest with the LRCs of the fully established schools. However, there were a number of challenges that constrained LRC voice and leadership development, the major one being the fact that this was a newly established school.

Keywords: *Learner Representative Council (LRC), learner leadership, learner voice, distributed leadership, leadership development opportunities, decision making*

Introduction and background

In Namibia, prior to independence in 1990, the right to freedom of expression and the right to be heard in schools was restricted amongst the majority of learners (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). During this time, there was a learner representative body, called the 'prefects', which consisted of senior students in secondary schools (Uushona, 2012). There were limited opportunities for democratic participation in decision-making amongst these learners under the South African Bantu Education system in Namibia (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). This means

that learners were hardly given opportunities for their voices to be heard and were forced to accept all rules imposed on them (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001).

After gaining independence in 1990, Namibia was faced with the immense task of reconstructing its education system. Soon after independence, the prefect body of learners was replaced with the Student Representative Council (SRC) (Ministry of Education and Culture, 1993). The SRC continued to serve as representatives of school management, just like the prefect system, rather than being an

authentic representative body of learners. As a result, the SRCs in schools still had little influence in the decision-making process (Uushona, 2012). As a solution to this problem, Education Act 16 of 2001 was legislated in an attempt to involve all stakeholders in education and ensure broad participation for learners in the decision-making process (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). The Education Act 60(1) of 2001 stipulates that “every state secondary school must establish a body of learners to be known as the Learners Representative Council (LRC)” (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001, p. 33). Moreover, the policy states that the role of the LRC is to provide a voice and to promote learner leadership in schools, since LRC members are also to participate in decision-making bodies, such as the school board and School Management Team (SMT) meetings (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001).

Currently, in Namibian schools, learner voice and leadership are being promoted through the Education Act 16 of 2001 which provides an opportunity to establish Learner Representative Councils (LRCs) in secondary schools. However, recent studies conducted on learner leadership by Uushona (2012) and Strydom (2016) have found that this body of learner leaders do not function all that effectively and sometimes exist in schools for the sake of adhering to the Education Act.

Statement of the problem and research objectives

From my experience as a high school teacher for nine years, I have observed little leadership opportunities within the structure of the Learner Representative Council (LRC). This means that LRC members are seldomly consulted in decision-making, and teachers often speak and decide on behalf of the learners (Grant & Nekondo, 2016). Consequently, the elective learner body – the LRC – at some Namibian schools exist purely for the sake of adhering to the *Educational Act 16 of 2001*, but authentic inclusion of learners in organisational decision-making does not often happen. This contradiction between policy and practice interested me, and it was the stimulus to carry out a study to explore the underlying factors constraining LRC voice and leadership in one newly established school in the Erongo region in Namibia and, in so doing, expand knowledge on learner leadership.

Findings of other studies on learner leadership provided additional motivation for me to conduct a study of this kind. In a study of learners’ participation in leadership in a Namibian school, Uushona (2012) found that “schools do not represent the interests of learners as [the learners] are not part of important decision-making platforms” (p. 105). Uushona argues that learners are not empowered and accepted as leaders who are able to act responsibly and maturely. In another Namibian study of learner leadership, Shekupakela-Nelulu (2008) found that “learners in our society are essentially viewed as children who should not have a voice in decision-making” (p. 1). In much the same way, a South African study conducted by Sithole also supports the above argument. Sithole (1998) found out that on cultural and traditional grounds, elderly people do not discuss important matters in the presence of children, and “to do that now would tarnish the respect which children must accord their elders, and bring about decay and morass in the traditional value system” (p. 93). This again roused my interest to carry out research in a newly established school in the Erongo region to learn more about the significance of learner voice and leadership. As other international studies have found, school leaders can make a difference in school and learners’ performance, if learners are granted autonomy to be part of the decision-making process (Leithwood, as cited in Swaffield & MacBeath, 2009, p. 12). Hence, it was my hope that this research would also develop a strong foundation of learner leadership practice at a school which was newly established.

It was against this background and in the light of my experience that there was a need to enhance learner voice in school leadership. In much the same way, Grant (2015) suggests that there is a “need for research on learner voice” (p. 96) because, although research on learner voice has been growing internationally, it is very limited in South Africa and other African countries including Namibia. Through this study I wished to contribute to the body of knowledge on learner leadership, an “under-researched area in Namibia” (Uushona, 2012, p. 112). This is primarily because much of the school leadership literature has conventionally focused on those in formal management positions, particularly principals (Bolden, 2011).

Research questions

Guided by the research goal, namely learner leadership developed in a newly established school. The study was done to develop a deep understanding of the current leadership practices of the Learner Representative Council (LRC) in the school and to provide answers to the following research questions:

1. How is learner leadership understood in the school?
2. What leadership development opportunities for LRC exist in the school?
3. What underlying factors constrain the development of LRC voice and leadership in the newly established school?

Literature review

Distributed leadership

This study was informed by the distributed perspective of leadership as it focused on the leadership activities of learners. There are competing and sometimes conflicting interpretations of what distributed leadership actually means. This means that there is no universally accepted definition of distributed leadership in a comprehensive review of the literature on distributed leadership. Harris and Spillane (2008) emphasise that distributed leadership recognises that there are multiple leaders in an organisation and leadership activities are widely shared within and between organisations (p. 31). Distributed leadership is primarily concerned with the practice of leadership rather than specific leadership roles or responsibilities (Spillane, 2006). It equates with shared, collective and extended leadership practices that build the capacity for change and improvement. In the school context, this means that leadership does not reside within the principals' offices, but schools require multiple leaders including teachers, parents and learners. The current favoured framework of distributed leadership moves away from hierarchical structures of organisational leadership, where one individual provides the leadership and visions for a school (Bolden, 2011). Within this study, distributed leadership is seen as a model or lens to develop individuals (learners) so that they can be agents of change, because it has shifted the focus from a leader to leadership as a property of the organisation.

According to Bennet et al. (as cited in Bolden, 2011), one of the characteristics of distributed leadership is "an emergent property of a group or network of interacting

individuals" (p. 257). This implies that the essence of teamwork is the most important aspect of distributed leadership. Literature on teamwork shares the view that working together produces results over and above what would be expected from individuals working alone (Spillane, 2006). In the education context, distributed views of leadership shift from the school principal and other formal management positions such as Heads of Departments, to a web of leaders, followers and their situations that give form to leadership practice (Spillane, 2006). In post-independent Namibia, schools have adopted a "strategy to increase school autonomy and devolve decision making to teachers and sometimes to parents, students and community leaders" (Pomuti & Weber, 2012, p. 1). This implies that opportunities for distributed leadership are provided to those who are close to the school so as to be included in decision-making when the need arises – this indicates distributed leadership as an emergent property of interaction. However, Gunter and Thomson (2007) contend that, "within the emergent field of school leadership, children are a virtual absence" (p. 23).

Distributed leadership as recognition of expertise is another distinctive characteristic of distributed leadership (Bennet et al., as cited in Bolden, 2011). This means that numerous responsibilities within the school require different expertise and all expertise do not belong to one person at the top of the organisational hierarchy – that is to those who are in formal management positions such as the principals and School Management Team. Schools nowadays are complex and require assistance from all the stakeholders such as teachers, learners and community members in the activity of leading (Uushona, 2012). This extending of leadership practice beyond the school principal position does not in any way undermine the vital role of the principal and School Management Team in the school, but instead shows that leadership is often a collective rather than an individualistic endeavour (Spillane, 2006). Recognising leadership within various individuals in schools can also motivate entire stakeholder groups, such as learners, teachers and community members, to feel valued. Pomuti and Weber (2012) highlight that in Namibia, *School-Based Management* was implemented on the assumption that school management would improve through sharing resources, experiences and expertise. This reform

assumes that sharing resources, experience and expertise will be achieved through shared, collaborative leadership and collaborative learning networks among learners and teachers.

The third distinctive characteristic as identified by Bennet et al. (as cited in Bolden, 2011) is that distributed leadership suggests *openness of boundaries*. While distributed leadership is generally explored from the perspective of the principal and Heads of Departments, it could also include all stakeholders in the school, as stated earlier. Distributed leadership theories on this point emphasise that trust and support are crucial in any organisation (Bolden, 2011). In the school community, learners are the majority group making up membership of school organisations (Woods, 2012, p. 75). It is therefore important to include them in all the school leadership activities, as in the end, this can “develop agency by expanding opportunities for learners to work in participatory ways with their peers on issues that are of concern to them” (Woods, 2012, p. 16). Hence this is a more democratic way of working, where learners feel trusted and supported by their school’s authority and, in the process, develop leadership. This in short means that leadership is to be open to all people in formal and informal management positions, as Spillane (2006) argues the distributed perspective of leadership involves both “mortals and heroes”.

Learner voice and leadership

There is no generic definition in literature of the concept ‘learner leadership’ (Uushona, 2012), as research regarding learner leadership is under-researched (Whitehead, 2009). According to Theron and Botha (as cited in Uushona, 2012), “learner leadership is a system of pupil leadership found in every school by means of which pupils take an active part in activities in a directive capacity” (p. 22). The above definition alludes to learners’ participation in a directing capacity, which may sometimes imply a management aspect, but does not extend to the outcomes or purpose of learner leadership (Uushona, 2012). However, learner leadership in this study can be understood as leadership that is distributed to include those who are not in formal positions – learners. This implies that learner leadership within the distributed perspective is typically viewed as being “less hierarchical and more collective, dispersed down and across hierarchies” (Coleman, 2005, p. 7). As

Spillane (2006) advises, the “education policy makers must acknowledge that the work of leading schools involves more than the leadership of the principal” (p. 101). Through this Act of 2001, it became compulsory for all secondary schools to have a Learner Representative Council democratically elected by learners at a school (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). The Learner Representative Council in turn elects two learners who have to represent them in the School Board (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). Hence, assigning learner leaders in the school leadership ensures that the skills and expertise of different leaders complement one another, by this, leadership is distributed.

International literature refers to the voices of learners as ‘student voice’ and the concept is used to describe the range of ways in which learners can share in decision-making in schools (Mitra & Gross, 2009). However, because Namibia uses the term ‘learners’ to refer to school going youth, ‘learner voice’ in this study was a concept used rather than student voice. In the context of this study, learner voice is about true democracy within a school and is also a “potential catalyst for learner agency” (Grant, 2015, p. 95). The prime purpose of learner voice is to capacitate learners for leadership roles while they are still in school. This means that allowing learner voice equally allows learners to take part in the overall leadership of the school. The rationale for this research is the absence of learner voice in schools, as a study conducted on learner leadership by Uushona (2012) found that LRC in schools are rarely involved in decision making. It is for this reason that this study aimed to develop agency in those who were largely silent in school, the learners. Learner leadership is not common as a concept or a practice in the majority of schools in African countries including Namibia (Grant & Nekondo, 2016, p. 26). However, within the limited studies done on learner leadership, researchers such as Uushona (2012), Strydom (2016) and Shekupakela-Nelulu (2008) have found it beneficial to learners and to the school at large.

The benefits of learner voice and leadership in schools

Developing a sense of ownership in learners is considered as one of the most important aspects of practicing learner leadership in schools (Mitra & Gross, 2009). If learners are

accepted as important people who can positively contribute to the development of their school, learners feel valued, and as a result, they can freely express themselves in matters around the school; this is democracy (Thomas, 2006). Thus, learner leadership promotes learner democracy in practice.

Apart from democracy and the sense of ownership in learners that can be achieved through learner voice, Mitra and Gross (2009) additionally suggest that the other benefit of learner leadership is to “help in increasing the tension and focus on pressing issues when needed” by means of “calm turbulence in areas that need solution” (p. 538). This means learners are equally positioned in identifying and finding solutions to pressing matters that might be somehow overlooked by the School Management Team (SMT) and teachers; they can also help in calming disorder, as well as stimulating teachers to act upon such issues. This is supported by Osberg, Pope, and Galloway (2006) who argue that “student data can galvanise otherwise sceptical teachers to make changes” (p. 329).

Factors hindering learner voice and leadership in schools

Adult power relations is one of the major challenges hindering learner leadership in schools is the issue of authority and power being hierarchical, ‘given’ to learners through the perception of teachers being in control. Strydom (2016) claims, even if a teacher tells a learner in the class that he/she is in control of the class, as soon as something happens (a learner falls or bumps his/her head), the teacher immediately takes back the power in the relationship and tends to act. The possible reason for this phenomenon could be that teachers do not trust learners; they therefore fail to give them full authority when deciding and acting on matters. Teachers are afraid that if learners are left to decide and act on their own without strict supervision, things will fall apart at the school.

Thus, teachers do not realise that it inspires learners when they are given control and responsibility and are placed in the driving seat (Flutter, 2006). Legitimising how much authority or power learners are allowed presents a challenge, as it limits them from fully exploring ideas and expressing what they feel would be best in certain situations. Silence of learner voice in decision-making is another challenge hindering learner leadership in schools. As mentioned earlier, the Namibian

Education Act of 2001 mandates that secondary school learners who are members of the Learner Representative Council should be part of the school governance through the participation in the School Board (Ministry of Basic Education and Culture, 2001). Research carried out in South Africa and Namibia, shows that the LRC are often not afforded full opportunities to participate in crucial decision-making processes by adult members of the School Board, directly or indirectly (Mncube, 2008; Uushona, 2012; Strydom, 2016). As a result, learner voice in decision-making is silenced in schools, because “arguably learners lack experience in the education matters” (Mncube, 2008, p. 78). Silencing the voice of the learners implicitly affects learner leadership development in schools (Mncube, 2008). Whilst learners are made to believe that they have an equal contribution in school affairs, in reality when it comes to actual decision-making and a final say, their views are mostly not considered. By this, the researcher means that learners are not given fair chances to air their opinions and concerns on what matters to them, and, as a result, learner voice is silenced in the school. Gender stereotypes have a power in hindering learner leadership in school. In many organisations, there is an indication that males are still seen as dominant (Strydom, 2016, p. 69). This portrays that gender stereotyping remains one reason for the under representation of female leaders in schools (Chabaya, Symphorosa, & Newman, 2007). A study by Mncube (2008) found that female learner leaders tend to be less vocal than male learner leaders, and relinquished decision-making activities to their male counterparts. Power relations also play a significant role in relation to gender issues, as the learner leadership studies of Uushona (2012) and Strydom (2016) have shown. Often there are suggestions that even learners at school hold on to the notion that males are seen as dominant (Strydom, 2016). Arguably, this deprives learner leadership development within female learners in a school.

Research method and design

The study adopted a qualitative research approach, and within this design a case-study design was employed to get a holistic picture of learner voice and leadership in the school. According to Leedy and Ormrod (2010), qualitative researchers believe that the “researcher’s ability to interpret and make sense of what he or she sees is critical for

understanding any social phenomenon” (p. 135). A qualitative design was suitable for this study as it assisted the researcher to make sense of how participants viewed learner voice and leadership in the school. A case-study is a “systematic and in-depth study of one particular case in its context” (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014, p. 42). This study fulfils the requirements of a case-study as it examines the single case of developing learner voice and leadership within the structure of the LRC in a newly established school.

Document analysis was used in this study as it is “less time –consuming since it requires data selection rather than data collection” (Bowen, 2009, p. 31). Documents such as the Education Act of 2001, School Development plan [SDP] of 2008, and Regulation made under Education Act of 2001 were analysed to gather the information on how learner leadership for LRC was promoted in schools. Observations were done during the eight weeks at the research site to get a holistic picture of learner voice and leadership in the school. Individual interviews with the principal, the HoD and one LRC guardian teacher, and questionnaires were administered to 13 LRC members and 2 guardian teachers.

Data analysis

An inductive analysis was utilised to identify multiple realities potentially present in the data (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). This inductive process used content analysis where the researcher looked for similarities and differences in the data that would corroborate or disconfirm the theory. With this, data from both individual transcripts, questionnaires, and both observation notes were analysed inductively. This meant that the researcher used inductive reasoning to analyse data that she generated using the aforementioned methods. By using content analysis, the researcher analysed data by noting themes and categories emerging from the data. After identifying these themes, she then arranged them into meaningful segments and used them to frame my narrative (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

Case study school

The study was carried out at a High School which only opened its doors in January 2016 and teaches learners from Grade 7-12 at that time. From the contextual profiling of the school, this school appeared to have come into existence to accommodate children who moved with their parents in search of work

(Amadhila, 2017). This is because the school is situated in a harbour town where many people migrate with their children to find jobs (Amadhila, 2017). As a result, the region struggles every year to find space for all the children in other schools around town, as they have reached their full capacity. Most parents of the learners at this school were working class families and lived in a nearby informal settlement. Parents don’t pay school fees, since all public schools in Namibia offer free education. At the time of this study, the school comprised 724 learners, a principal, two Heads of Departments, 24 teachers, one secretary and three support staff. The school offered three fields of study, namely: Commerce, Social Science, and Science. Mathematics, Biology, English, and Afrikaans were compulsory for all the learners. The school had a functioning School Board which comes in existence in January 2017, a School Management Team, a Staff Development Programme, as well as the LRC.

Ethics

When working with individuals, it is important that the researcher follows and abides by the ethical guidelines (Nieuwenhuis, 2007). Participants were fully informed about the research goals and their rights. The researcher also explained what the research was all about and made it clear to the participants that they had the right to withdraw from the study at any time. Pseudonyms were used to ensure anonymity. In addition, as a researcher, she again explained to the participants that they should feel free to answer the questions with honesty, as she would not reveal anyone’s responses shared during this study. The results of the study were presented in an anonymous manner in order to protect the participants’ identities (Nieuwenhuis, 2007).

Research findings

Understanding of learner leadership

Across all the data sets, learner leadership was repeatedly understood as the structure of the Learner Representative Council (LRC) in the school. The following citation from the participants support the claim. The HoD during the interview shared her understanding that:

“Learner leadership is the way of giving authority to a group of learners to represent others in the school and to act as leaders. Learner leadership is constituted within those learners who are in the capacity as LRC

members". *"Learner leadership is when learners who are LRC members are involved in many decision-making, voicing on behalf of other learners in the school"* (Guardian 1).

In addition, an LRC understood learner leadership in the same way as she also mentioned in the questionnaires that *"learner leadership involve learners that stood up for other learners in the school and being their voice for them"* (LRC 1). On the other hand, the principal understood learner leadership as a policing role that the LRC had, in helping the teachers to maintain order and discipline in the school. *"Roles given to learners in the school community to supervise their compatriots"* (Principal). Another participant had a mutual understanding of the concept learner leadership as the principal, that *"learner leadership is being the LRC's role of supervising, controlling and monitoring other learners to maintain discipline in the school"* (LRC 6). Roles such as supervising, controlling and monitoring resonate with the traditional thinking of leadership (Tng, 2009). This showed that leadership of learners in this school was viewed in a managerial way, where learners were strictly adhering to and following a set of rules (Mullins, 2010) this, as Uushona (2012) rightly argues, is not leadership. During my stay at the school, the policing roles of the LRC became obvious. The researcher observed that some of the LRC members during break-times used to stand at the gate supervising other learners not to sneak out of the school premises. Within this restricted understanding of learner leadership, as confined to the leadership of the LRC, it is evidently arguable from the above data that *voice of the voiceless and a policing role* were merely the overall understanding of learner leadership in the newly established school.

Leadership development opportunities existed for the LRC

Leadership development opportunities are referred to be the empowerment programmes existing in (and outside of) the school for the LRC, to equip them with necessary skills and knowledge to take up their roles and functions in the school more effectively (Uushona, 2012, p. 72). Participants from the study showed that there were various opportunities offered by the school for leadership developments of the LRC. The following citations from the participants support the claim:

"Leadership training camp is one of the leadership opportunities offered to all our LRC members immediately after their appointment to the council" (Principal). This opportunity was clearly explained by the HoD in the interview as she mentioned that, *"leadership training camp is the form of training that is offered outside town where our LRC are engaged in different activities to build and empower them on how to handle conflict, guide them on how to lead and work as a team and also to allow open communication"*.

The Principal argues that *"this type of training have a potential to develop the LRC members with some leadership skills"*. Such exercise is also supported by McGregor (2006) who affirms that learner leaders gain necessary leadership skills and knowledge by engaging in organisational projects outside the school.

"The LRC community networking events are also one of the opportunities availed by this school, to help our LRC to establish effective links with LRCs of other schools" (HoD). *"These events are organised to allow the LRCs of different schools within the community, to exchange information by interacting with each other, and sharing their expertise, equipment and experiences"* (Guardian 3).

Across all data sets, participants showed that three types of community networking events are offered to the LRC, school exchange programme, town council breakfast and junior regional council.

"The school exchange programme is when the LRC of one school visit the LRC of another school within the community to solicit information on good practices from each other and adapt those that fit their context" (Principal). *"A Town Council breakfast sponsored by the municipality of the town for the LRCs of all high schools in the town is also another networking event offered. The main aim of this breakfast is to allow the LRC of different schools to interact and develop each other professionally and socially through contact"* (HoD).

This constituted an example of the distribution of leadership amongst learners, across the various schools in the community.

"The other community networking event availed is the Junior Regional Council. This

opportunity is availed by the regional office where the school chose four LRC members who are academically performing learners, to serve in the Junior Regional Council” (HoD). The HoD further explained that “this opportunity allowed the four elected LRC members from the school to enhance their public participation in the law-making process”.

However, this selection is likely to be based on characteristics reminiscent of ‘trait theory’ that focuses on leaders who possess certain qualities which in this case, were to be academically gifted (Mullins, 2010). Surely there are benefits to this type of activity, and despite being elitist, it was certainly a great opportunity and good experience for leadership development for the few chosen.

“Mentoring programmes is another form of leadership development for the LRC at the school (Guardian 2). Mentoring programmes were equated to the LRC meetings at the case-study school said the Guardian 2. The Principal also claims that “we have three guardian teachers who act as mentors to our LRC, through mentoring, the LRC members are likely to develop leadership because teachers are expected to act as learners’ role models”, who display “interpersonal skills, a positive outlook, a commitment to excellence, growth and leadership qualities” (Wright & Carrese, 2002, p. 639).

Social activities in the school, according to the Regulation made under the Education Act of 2001, one function of the LRC is to “undertake projects and programs aimed at providing cultural, sport and social activities for learners” in the school, (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001, p. 19). Social activities include extra-mural activities such as sports coaching, bazaar, fundraising activities and others (Ministry of Basic Education, Sport and Culture, 2001). Across the data sets, hosting fund raising events was highlighted as a leadership development opportunity by almost all participants.

“Fund raising events such as a fete (school bazaar) and beauty pageant event are placed in the hands of the LRC in the school to gather some funds, which the school can use for development” (HoD). “We host different fundraising events to collect money to build a school hall for conducting our morning

assemblies” (LRC 11).

The HoD claims that “organisational skills are believed to be developed within the LRC members in taking part in the social events”. This is in line with the view of Grant and Nekondo (2016) that organising skills are important in the development of learner leaders (p. 25). Organizing such events resulted in developing LRC voice and leadership since they were engaged in consultations, marketing and also in creativity to make sure such events were a success. In support of this, Grant and Nekondo (2016) argue that learners get inspired when they are given an opportunity to be in the driving seat (p. 25).

Factors constraining LRC voice and leadership development

Findings revealed that the *newness of the school* seemed to have the potential to hinder the development of LRC voice and leadership at the newly established high school. During this study, the Principal, HoD and LRC Guardian Teacher 1 were asked during the interviews if they had encountered any challenges on working with the LRC. The HoD made it clear during the interviews that “the LRC in this school are always suggesting unnecessary things to their guardian teachers, forgetting that this is still a new school”. The principal similarly asserted that “our LRC members suggest for things that they see at other schools which are not possible; we cannot take everything said by them because this is still a new school”. These excerpts suggest that the status of the case-study school as a new school was not considered a real opportunity for the development of voice and leadership in learners. Ironically, the adults in the school did not see the newness of the school as a good opportunity to open up new possibilities for the development of LRC voice and leadership. They were unwilling to listen to learner ideas which could likely contribute to the development and growth of their school (Mitra & Gross, 2009). From the findings it is evident that the newness of the school was used as a reason to suppress learner input.

The *absence of the school’s vision and mission statement* also seemed to be a challenge experienced in developing LRC voice and leadership in the case-study school. “Our school had been in existence for almost two years without a vision and a mission statement” (Guardian 1). The HoD and Principal also claimed that the school did not

yet have a vision and mission statement and is in the process of formulating one. According to the policy document *School Development Plan of 2008*, “once a school is established, it has to develop its own mission and vision statements and display it in the foyer of the school for everybody to see” (School Development Plan, 2008, p. 2). The policy document also states that “The vision and the mission statement of every school must guide and determine the school’s decision-making process”, this means that the vision and mission statements should inspire and direct the school team as to why the school exists (School Development Plan, 2008, p. 2). From this finding the researcher argues that the absence of a vision and mission statements indirectly became a challenge, which had the potential to hinder leadership development of the LRC in the school because, without a vision and mission statement, the school lacked direction (Ipinge, 2003). A vision and mission statements are supposed to provide motivation and guidance to all stakeholders in a school, including the LRC (School Development Plan, 2008, p. 2).

The *Absence of the LRC constitution in the school* was seen as another challenge which had a negative impact on the members of the LRC. The LRC constitution is a prescribed document with a list of duties and functions of the LRC. According to the *Education Act of 2001*, the LRC should be “in accordance with the prescribed guidelines which must determine the composition of the duties and functions of such council” (Ministry of Basic Education Sport and Culture, 2001, p. 33). By law every school is entitled to compose its own LRC constitution in line with the Regulation made under the Education Act of 2001. The school existed for almost two years as I stated earlier; however, data from questionnaires revealed that the LRC at this high school functioned without an LRC constitution. As an LRC member wrote in his questionnaire that “we do not an LRC constitution which can guide us on what to do, and sometimes some LRC do duties which are not for LRC” (LRC 1). I argue that this was a challenge experienced in the school by the LRC, because a constitution as a document is supposed to assist the LRC members to be aware of their roles and functions within their school.

Conclusion

The study was limited to 13 LRC members, the principal, one HoD and three LRC guardian teachers of a newly established school and did

not represent similar situations of other new schools in Namibia. Since the case-study findings cannot be generalised because of the small population, transferability is therefore only applicable in this study. The researcher hopes that the insight gleaned from this study may help to stimulate discussion and debate amongst the educators as the findings revealed that leadership was indeed distributed in the school, to some degree. However, there was a need for expansion, and it was recommended that the school created additional platforms where more learners could involve themselves in leadership development activities. These might include afternoon school learner leadership clubs (Grant, 2015; Grant & Nekondo, 2016). Involving learners in different clubs could provide them with an opportunity to develop learner voice and leadership in school; hence, leadership is likely to be widely distributed to involve those who are not in formal management positions. Learner voice and leadership is an under-researched topic in Namibia. More vigorous research is needed to grow this body of knowledge. For this reason, the researcher suggests that future Namibian researchers and scholars conduct and explore more comprehensive and large-scale studies in different schools, including newly established schools in different regions. A comprehensive study has the potential to explore more information about learner voice and leadership practices in schools.

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