DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE, LEADERSHIP AND MANAGEMENT: A CASE STUDY OF TWO SCHOOLS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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ABSTRACT

This article reports on a qualitative study that investigated the functioning of school governing bodies (SGBs) as a tool for promoting democracy in two schools. Data was gathered through interviews, observations and document reviews. Findings revealed that democracy was in existence and practised at both schools and that it was characterised by shared decision making and acknowledged rights of individuals, representations, participation and equality. Two structures for promoting democracy were found to be in existence in both schools. These are school governing bodies and representative councils for learners. Such structures were found to be functioning effectively and contributing to the democracy in schools. However, although the learner voice was represented at both schools, learner participation in crucial issues in both the schools was limited. The study recommends that all teachers, learners and parent representatives on the SGBs be trained in skills such as deliberation, debate, dialogue and managing differences. Furthermore, training or capacity building related to advocacy skills and leadership development should be provided for all members of the SGBs, including teachers. The more learners, parents and staff are involved in school policy and decision making, the more there is a genuine community involvement in schools, and the more effective a school becomes. Also, schools need to move towards learner-initiated decision making where learners initiate the process and invite adults to join them in making decisions. Also, there is need for teachers to be trained in democratic ways of operating in the school and classroom, which will possibly help them learn ways of working democratically in both the whole school and the classroom.

Keywords: school governing bodies, representative council for learners, leadership and management

INTRODUCTION

Democracy is a continual process and never achieved. Dewey (1937: 235) asserts that:

> The very idea of democracy, the meaning of democracy, must be continually explored afresh; it has to be constantly discovered, and rediscovered, remade and reorganized.

In short, democracy is not static and neither is it a perfect state that can be attained. Instead, it is an ideal that people can work towards. In South Africa, as in any other affirmed democratic country, it is essential to monitor the progress of democracy, including how this is played out in schools. Vigilance is needed on understandings of democracy by those in power as well as those less powerful. President Jacob Zuma recently said that minority groups have 'less rights' than majority groups, and that the majority prevailed – 'that's how democracy works' (*Guardian Express* 13 July 2013). There was an understandable outcry from the parliamentary opposition benches, particularly as this goes against the constitutional affirmation of equality for all and constitutional prohibitions on discrimination.

The questions for this article are how democracy is currently understood by different stakeholders in schools – principals, parents, teachers and learners. Two core educational concepts can be distinguished: schooling for democracy and schools as democracies (O'Hair *et al*. 2000). The former involves preparing learners for living in a democratic society, while the latter is concerned with creating schools that are organised, governed and practised as democracies. Clearly these two are inextricably linked: students cannot learn in the abstract about democracy, but need to experience it on a daily basis for the principles to be ingrained.

Yet the concept of democracy is hugely complex and contested. After outlining the democratic values in the South African Constitution, this article briefly discusses the conventional features of democracy as they appear in the literature. It then looks at how such ideals of democracy have been applied to the school level. This is often in theory rather than practice. Authoritarian forms of organization are evident in most schools internationally. Maitles and Deuchar (2007) assert that in Scotland and across much of Europe, schools are still decidedly authoritarian. Similarly, Trafford (2008: 411) refers to the 'widespread and persistent authoritarian tradition in schooling'. In Africa, too, hierarchical organization within schools still prevails. Karlsson and Mbokazi (2005: 11) in a case study of the ethos in two schools refer to leadership of school management at one of the sample schools in KwaZulu-Natal as 'characterised by formality and authoritarianism'. Similarly, Grant (2006: 525) referred to the continued existence of a 'hierarchical school organization controlled by autocratic principals' at some South African schools..

During the apartheid era South African schools operated under a system of authoritarianism emphasizing a rigid, top-down or hierarchical approach to management. Principals were compelled to follow instructions from the Department of Education

(DoE). The advent of democracy prompted the democratization of the education system and this is captured in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA). In its preamble the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA) emphasizes a new set of values and a move away from the past so as to 'establish a society based on democratic values, social justice and fundamental human rights; lay the foundations for a democratic and open society' (RSA 1996a: 1). It follows that the Constitution has to be supported by democratic institutions. This argument is expounded by Nkomo, Chisholm and McKinney (2004), who posit that it is essential for all social institutions working within the parameters of the Constitution to advance a society that reflects the values and principles contained therein.

The specific democratic values espoused in the Constitution are adult suffrage, with elections and a multiparty system; equity and non-racialism, non-sexism, and non-discrimination on grounds of sexual orientation; advancement of human rights and freedoms, including freedom from violence, freedom of religion and freedom of expression; a cooperative government, with agreed procedures and amicable dispute resolution; and accountability, responsiveness and openness. All these features and values can be translated into the school level, and a truly democratic school would be expected to demonstrate all of them, suitably adapted (such as representation and participation in decision making rather than adult suffrage).

The article therefore reports on a study of stakeholder views of democracy in two secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. It is from a larger study in these schools of experiences and practices of the principals in creating democratic schools (Naidoo 2012). The schools were selected for study as having reportedly democratic attributes, where participants would be likely to have some understandings of what democracy in society and school should look like, and which should be mirroring the Constitutional values.

CONCEPTUALISATIONS OF DEMOCRACY

Yilmaz (2009) contends the various conceptualisations of democracy can be reflected on a continuum. At one end is formal, procedural democracy and at the other end a social conception of democracy. This relates to the distinction often made between 'thick' democracy and 'thin' democracy. Carr (2008a) explains that the thick notion of democracy is concerned with power relations, identity and social change, whereas the thin interpretation essentially involves electoral processes, political parties, and structures related to formal democracy. Green (1999) adds that the thick notion of democracy focuses on the characteristics and skills that are essential for individuals to become fully participatory members of their democratic society.

The nomenclature of 'thin' sounds negative, but Young (2000) cautions against assuming that representative democracy is incompatible with deep (thick) democracy. They are not alternatives, but perhaps different levels of operation. Ideally, everyone should be able to participate – yet in practice this is rarely possible. Representative

democracy is a compromise that allows some stake in society – in the choosing of representatives, and in ensuring that these representatives do represent the views of constituents, and that they are accountable and transparent in their actions.

Participatory democracy emphasizes involvement of individuals; however, meaningful inclusion will only be achieved when all stakeholders are able to influence the outcome of the decisions. This would imply that deliberation between stakeholders is essential, and is the heart of democracy itself (Ross 2004). Deliberative democracy then refers to a process in which individuals voluntarily engage in open discussion to share knowledge, exchange views, and understand the perspectives of others, which contributes to agreed upon policies (McDevitt and Kiousis 2004).

Sometimes decentralisation is linked to democracy, but it is not necessarily more democratic than centralised control. It depends how far governance is decentralised to different levels, and what sorts of powers are given to whom, and how they use it. There can be decentralisation of budgets, for example, right down to the school level, but if the principal is still autocratic, democracy does not flourish in that school. Participatory democracy therefore can include the notion of subsidiarity – that a matter ought to be handled by the smallest, lowest, or least centralised authority capable of addressing that matter effectively. An interesting exercise done with students and teachers in work on Student Councils (Yamashita and Davies 2010) is to ask who can, should or does make decisions on various aspects of school life – uniform, discipline, teaching methods, school dinners, homework, appointment of staff. It enables discussion of when a top-down decision, or rule, is necessary and when a matter can be devolved or be part of a joint decision. At a small scale, school level, it is possible to combine representative and deliberative democracy. In South Africa, Representative Councils of Learners (RCLs) and the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) are clearly both representative and deliberative structures that can work towards what Lefrançois and Ethier (2010) see as the idealized conditions of deliberative democracy.

As with Dewey's (1939) ideals of humanism and belief in the inherent capabilities of people, O'Hair, McLaughlin and Reitzug (2000) capture the notion of democracy being associated with humanism, and add that democracy as a way of living involves the open flow and critique of ideas, with an authentic concern for others as well as the common good. Based on this conception, Print, Ørnstrøm and Nielsen (2002) add that democracy is about tolerance, compromise, willingness to listen to the views of others, willingness to be influenced by the arguments put forth by others, and to accept the attitudes and opinions of others.

Hence even thick democracy is not just about deliberation but espouses ethics and empathy. The key educational point about thick, participative democracy is that it requires skills of deliberation itself and of collective decision-making. These skills have to be learned and practised.

DEMOCRATIC EDUCATION

Much has been written on the principles of democratic education, contrasting this with authoritarian, hierarchical and teacher-centred institutions. Kelly (1995) refers to the basic principles of education in a democratic society that are of significance to democratic schools, which include human rights, equality to entitlement, openness in the face of knowledge, individual autonomy and empowerment – as well as faith in individuals. Mncube and Harber (2010) state that democratic schools generally exhibit the following characteristics of democracy: rights of individuals, equity, participation and informed choice. Kensler (2010) refers to ten democratic principles within schools: purpose and vision, dialogue and listening, integrity, accountability, choice, individual and collective, decentralization, transparency, fairness and dignity, reflection and evaluation. Gore (2002) includes inclusive consultation and collaboration, equality of opportunity in representation, freedom for critical reflection and a focus on the common good.

Beane and Apple (1999: 10) explain that:

> Democratic schools, like democracy itself do not happen by chance. They result from explicit attempts … to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life.

These arrangements and opportunities incorporate two lines of work. The first involves creating democratic structures and processes by which life in the school is carried out; and the second involves creating a curriculum that will give young people democratic experiences (Beane and Apple 1999). They add that the conditions on which democracy is dependent are also fundamental concerns of democratic schools. These conditions include an open flow of ideas so that individuals are informed, faith in the potential of individuals to find solutions to problems, being able to critically reflect on issues, and being concerned about the dignity, welfare and rights of others as well as the common good.

One question is whether 'being concerned' is enough. Davies (2004: 212) proposes the notion of 'interruptive democracy' in schools, defined as 'the process by which people are enabled to intervene in practices which continue injustice'. This is the disposition to challenge, to find spaces for dissent, resilience and action. A rights-based school does not simply accord rights to learners and teachers, but fosters habits in learners to stand up for the rights of others – of course through democratic means, not violently. Critical thinking and critical political or social education involve practice in the different ways to create social change in addition to the representative process, whether in community work, campaigns, lobbying, petitions or peaceful demonstrations. It is preparation for active, democratic citizenship.

METHODOLOGY FOR EXPLORING STAKEHOLDER VIEWS OF DEMOCRACY

Given all these different dimensions of democracy, what do people inside the schools see as democracy? Which are the most salient for them? Where on the spectrum between thin or procedural democracy and thick, direct or active participative democracy do they stand? Is there congruence between what they say and what the actual practice is in the school?

This article reports on illustrative qualitative work in two South African secondary schools conducted in 2011. Secondary schools were targeted because at the heart of democratic schools are the voices of the learners; the SASA (RSA 1996b) makes provision for the RCL only in schools that have learners in Grades 8–12. The particular schools were chosen because they had some democratic features, already known to one of the researchers (Naidoo 2012). These included structural components of a functioning SGB and an RCL, known work involving the community and a reputation for a learner-centred approach to teaching and learning. These large schools were co-educational, public schools and were characterized by a growing number of black teachers. At both the schools there were teacher liaison officers and the RCL was elected through a voting system. For confidentiality, the schools are given the fictitious names of Red Star Secondary and Excell Secondary.

Three main research instruments allowed for some triangulation of data: observations (of the principal at their work, of SGB meetings, of staff meetings and staff briefing sessions); document analysis (of the agendas and minutes of staff and SGB meetings, discipline records, the incident book and notices to parents); and semi-structured interviews (with the principal, three parents, three teachers and three learners). At each school these interviewees included a teacher representative, a parent representative and a learner representative from the SGB.

The questions in the interviews were relatively open-ended, in the sense of asking people about their understandings of democracy, whether it was practised in the school, what structures there were, what the role of the principal was in developing it, and how or whether democracy was promoted in curriculum and teaching methods. Hence no particular indicators or components of democracy were given to respondents (such as rights, or equity, or collaboration, or dignity, or non-discrimination, or representation, as outlined earlier). Instead, the aim was to see what people understood by the term, and what their priorities seemed to be. It was also to identify the gaps, and whether the conceptualisation and practice of democracy were broad or narrow, thick or thin, direct or indirect.

FINDINGS ON THE DEMOCRATIC SCHOOL

The findings revealed four main areas that people identified as democratic: collective decision making and shared vision; structures for voice and representation; respect,

rights and diversity; and critical thinking and openness. From the outset it must be acknowledged that much of what people say is prescriptive, that is, saying that a democracy school 'should' have various features, rather than 'our school does this, and it is democratic'. Presumably this conceptual understanding of democracy does come from experiencing it in practice, but it cannot be guaranteed.

Decision making

A common thread running through all the responses was the idea of all stakeholders being involved in decision making. For example, teacher 2 from Excell Secondary School stated that:

> In a democratic school there is shared and collective decision-making by all stakeholders. All stakeholders are consulted … when it comes to decision-making everyone participates and everybody's open and included in decision-making ….

Thus the teacher acknowledged the idea of shared decision-making but also emphasized the need to get all stakeholders involved in the process. This also suggests the need for inclusion. Such inclusivity was echoed by the principal of Red Star Secondary School, who explained that:

> My understanding of making a school democratic is that learners, parents, staff and other relevant stakeholders be given the opportunity and space to contribute meaningfully to decision-making for the continued progress of the school.

The response from learner 1 at Red Star Secondary School was similarly that:

> Decision-making should be shared; everyone involved should be allowed to make a contribution and should share their own thoughts. I don't believe that every decision should be made solely by one person. Involvement of people from outside of the school environment can help a school grow and develop.

At the same school, parent 1 echoed the notion of shared decision making:

I believe that the key component of an expressly democratic school is the opportunity for all the members of the school governing body to air their views and in so doing take part in decision making as regularly as possible. But what is even more important is the consideration these views are given. One cannot rhapsodize the merits of collective decision making without reflecting upon whether the views of teachers, or even learners, are considered in as unprejudiced manner as possible.

The above response accentuates the point that although we can enthuse about collective decision making, there is a need to consider the way in which the views of the stakeholders are received. The respondent believes that the views of all, 'even' learners, should be received with an open mind. This is a crucial point.

This notion of shared decision making that all the respondents felt strongly about is corroborated by Goodlad *et al*. (2004: 93), who aptly state that democracy is based on the idea that, 'we each have a voice and that voice counts'. The idea of shared decision making is accentuated within the 'every voice counts' framework that is clearly articulated in the SASA. The platform for collective decision making manifests itself in the SASA 84 of 1996 via the formation of the SGB. Kensler (2010) argues that in a democracy it is assumed that each individual is worthy of participation; hence, we would suppose, every voice does count. The question is how to operationalize this ideal. In voting, every vote does count. But in deliberative or consultative democracy, it is more difficult to make the calculation. In the collection, *Children as decision-makers in education* (Cox *et al*. 2010), many examples were found across different countries of children's participation in school life, but it was also found that institutional norms could restrict this, specifying arenas where such participation was not seen as appropriate – for example curriculum, or teacher recruitment. The 'voice' may be confined to 'tame areas' such as lunches or sports days rather than the central rationale for school, which is teaching and learning.

The same empirical question applies to 'listening'. A culture of listening is indeed a prerequisite for democracy. The principal at Excell Secondary School believed that 'it's that listening ear that's critical in a democratic school'. Steyn *et al*. (2004) elaborate that listening is an important element in communication, and a willingness to hear is essential. Yet the next obvious question is whether that listening actually influences decisions and actions, and, going back to bias, what happens when there are competing views and competitions for the listening ear. This research was not always able to establish whose voice would take precedence, on what criteria, and whether there were patterns.

However, the principals at the sample schools appeared to embrace the notion of shared decision making, dialogue and discussion as advocated by Bennis and Graves (2007) and Steyn (2004), and this became evident during observations of meetings. At a School Management Team (SMT) meeting at Red Star Secondary School where post-provisioning norms (PPN – this refers to the total number of state paid educator posts allocated to an institution regardless of their post level) (Naicker 2005:8) were discussed, the principal sought input from all management members. It was possible to witness first hand how the principal, who trusted his SMT, was asked to provide statistics. They also deliberated on the actual document received from the DoE. The management members were free to make inputs and regularly analyzed the statistics and the document. The principal as well as the other management members often used the words 'we' and 'us', suggesting that they were part of a team, which could also imply a feeling of togetherness. In other words, the principal tried to create a sense of unity or oneness.

In his attempts to get inputs from other individuals, the principal often asked, 'Tell us what you are thinking'. He appeared to be overtly attempting to get others involved in

decision making. At one point he stated, 'We need to sort this issue out'. These utterances also suggest the notion of shared responsibility with regard to decision making, hinting towards local participatory democracy. The principal appeared to be trying to get everyone to talk so that they could reach some decision. This links to November *et al.'s* (2010) ideal for principal-educators to open up channels of communication for dialogue.

At the same time, there was also useful understanding from respondents that a democratic culture is not about everyone participating in every decision at every moment. There are times when an authoritarian, instant or top-down response is necessary – if a fire broke out, or if a learner's safety was threatened. Confidential information about a learner or a family is also rarely to be shared. Although it was clear from the responses that in democratic schools there is a move away from individual decision making, teacher 1 at Red Star Secondary School commented:

> You can't on every single issue be democratic but at least wherever you can if the relevant role players can be identified and their opinions and their comments sought as to what they have to say …. I think there are times when maybe the principal would have to make a decision in a kind of autocratic way for the running of the school, for the wheels to turn. You cannot for every single issue be democratic. There are times when the principal will have to take a stand although it should be more the exception rather than the rule.

Excell Secondary School teacher 3 had a similar response:

> So the leader has to lead and the leader has to be led at times. I'm just saying then that as the leader the principal has at times to make decisions all by himself and most times as a leader you have to listen to other people.

The respondent also appears to accept the idea of the principal occasionally engaging in decision making without consulting others. In line with the aforementioned argument was the response from the principal at Excell Secondary School:

> [S]o sometimes if somebody has to come into my school and tell me I'm being undemocratic – I mean there may be certain cases, instances, I'm not saying no. It wasn't done intentionally but I can tell you there were more instances I was democratic than undemocratic.

It is clearly a question of balance and appropriateness. In like vein, Harris and Chapman (2002) in their study of democratic leadership for school improvement, found that at critical times principals adopted more autocratic leadership practices. In these two South African schools there seemed to be good understanding of the limits as well as benefits of democracy.

Linked to shared decision making was the notion of a shared vision and purpose. While a feature on Kensler's list, there would not be agreement that this is necessarily a precondition for democracy. Democracy is arguably more about the provision for dissent

and change than about the notion that all must share the same purpose. Shared vision was unsurprisingly mentioned only by principals, teachers and parents, not learners, and may relate more to management training and wanting a sense of ownership than to anything in the Constitution. However, the Red Star principal made an interesting remark. He reiterated that the school's vision should be a shared one and therefore emphasized that:

> It … is not an individual's vision but a collective vision … people need to understand that this is a vision for the school and we are not working here for individual glory. We are not working here for our egos.

The key point would be of collective responsibility: in democratic terms it is less the vision itself as the processes by which it was achieved and crucially, how it can be operationalized in daily practice as well as how it can be revised if necessary.

STRUCTURES FOR VOICE AND REPRESENTATION

In a largish organisation such as a secondary school, the question is of the structures in place whereby views are canvassed and decision making can be collaborative. The document review at Red Star Secondary School revealed the School Management Plan 2000 stating:

> It is imperative that we move away from the farce of "democratic management" to the tremendous potentialities inherent in a structure where there is democratic participatory management. For this to occur it is vitally important that the whole staff be represented in the processes of decision-making …. "Traditional staff meetings" should essentially become "Management Council Meetings" in which members of staff represent themselves and contribute directly to decision-making (*Red Star School Management Plan* 2000: 2).

The above plan also referred to breaking up traditional hierarchies in decision making and a move towards collaborative participation in organizational decision making. Thus it is evident that the principal at Red Star Secondary School, as early as 12 years previously, aimed at promoting shared decision making. Furthermore, from observations at the school it was noted that the offices of the SMT and the staff room were moved closer to the principal's office. This close physical proximity of the offices and the staff room was aimed at increasing interaction, collaboration, consultation and communication between the teachers and SMT of which the principal was part. The principal at Red Star Secondary School commented, 'In this way management will get closer to the staff".

Parent 3 at Red Star Secondary School went on to add another dimension:

> This collective decision-making should involve the voices of all those concerned. You can't have collective decision making if individuals representing a particular group are not present. So representativeness is essential.

The interviewee alluded to the need for representation of the various stakeholders on the SGB. This idea was also captured in the response by Excell Secondary School parent 2 who aptly stated, 'democratic schools will see to it that individuals representing the various groups like the teachers, parents and learners are fully represented'. Representation of stakeholders is clearly spelt out in the SASA. Observations, interviews and document review indicated that all stakeholders were officially represented on the SGBs at both of the schools.

Yet while parents were encouraged to contribute to shared decision making, during observation of the SGB meetings minimal participation by the learners was noted. This suggests that learners' voices are still silenced. Mncube and Harber (2009) and Mabovula (2008) had similar findings with regard to the learner voice in South African schools. They found that learners were often used for tokenism and decoration – referring to Hart's (1992) well known ladder of participation, where Level Two represents decoration and Level Three denotes tokenism – and where only higher levels mean real participation. In addressing stakeholder participation, Botha (2010) maintains that principals should create spaces for debate and dialogue so that there is adequate involvement of learner and parent representatives on the SGB. Interestingly, Adams and Waghid (2005) in a study in schools in the Western Cape found that despite the existence of SASA, SGBs do not seem to be conclusively democratic. Findings from their study show that although parent and learner representatives on the SGBs participate, their 'voices are seldom heard. They participate without having the opportunity to influence decisions' (Adams and Waghid 2005: 31). This research also was not able to discern real inclusion of learners in decision making at SGB level.

Finally, all the teacher representatives, parent representatives, principals and one of the learner representatives referred to parent apathy. The principal at Red Star Secondary School claimed, 'the idea that parents should take ownership of the school is not as widespread as it should be'. The teacher representative at Excell Secondary School stated:

> From my experience in this school here I feel the parent involvement is a major problem. I find this link between the school and home has been broken. When we talk in terms of parent involvement we expect more.

The question is whether the expectations are too high, or whether more can be done to involve parents.

Involvement may be the responsibility of those with greater power. With regard to the learner participation in the SGB meetings at Red Star Secondary School, both the learner governors were present. These learners presented a report on the events they would be hosting for the year. However, there was only one learner representative present at the meeting at Excell Secondary School. At both schools it was felt that there was not enough effort, if any, on the part of the parent or teacher representatives to include the learners in the discussion. It was only the principal at Excell Secondary

School who asked the learner for her input just once during the meeting. Discussions at SGB meetings gave an impression that the learner representatives were not consulted frequently. It is hard for those without experience or training to make an unsolicited intervention.

This finding is similar to that of Mabovula's (2009) study where learner participation in school governance in five secondary schools in the Eastern Cape was investigated. It was found that although the democratization of school governance has given all stakeholders a powerful voice in school issues through the RCLs, 'learners voices are, seemingly, being silenced' (Mabovula 2009: 219). Rubin and Silva (2003) advise that inclusion of learner voices in school governance requires offering learners realistic space and time to be included in the process of decision making. However, it was felt that perhaps this was not given much attention at the SGB meetings observed at both schools.

At Red Star Secondary School the teacher representative claimed:

> [I]n terms of the learner voice I would say that it is not well incorporated …. I must emphasise that the learners are represented on the SGB and issues are often discussed with them. Maybe we should be including them more. I don't think we actually consult them on many issues. We tend more to tell them what's going on. Major issues are sorted out by us the teachers, principal, management and parents.

Two significant points can be noted from this: that learners are often 'told' rather than consulted, and that 'major' issues are sorted out by adults. The minutes of SGB meetings revealed inputs from learners on issues such as change in the school uniform (which was implemented at Excell Secondary School), the need for cutting of the grass after school and conduct of learners after school. These refer to less central issues for the school.

Is training the key? The principal at Excell Secondary School felt:

> We as a school can do a little bit more in terms of training of those learners. Although we've done boot camps, leadership courses, etc. there's still room to get to that level or stage. A lot of it is about exposure. I mean it's always about improving things.

The notion of 'exposure' as well as training is interesting. Perhaps giving learners time and space to articulate their inputs will be a better way to address the issue. However, training in deliberation skills and leadership skills will always be beneficial.

It may also be that the standard representative structures are not always the best place for real deliberation and inclusion. The parent representative of Red Star Secondary School gave a significant example of involvement outside such structures:

> X is a strong person with an impeccable character and despite the severe lack of time [after the three week long teachers' strike] and pressing worries felt by learners and teachers he decided to consult the learners. And so, in a forum of the grade twelve learner body and their teachers he discussed the pros and cons of various solutions and facilitated a discussion between the learners and teachers. Learners were given a chance

to decide whether they were equipped to write the departmental exam or felt unprepared. They were allowed to air their worries and vote on dates on which examinations would take place. The days following this discussion were filled with ingenious strategies to target key subjects, teaching, and more meetings during which the entire process of planning was explained to the learners and their minds put at ease.

Temporary forums can be useful places to address a pressing concern. The other forums for voice and representation are the more permanent committees and councils. Grille (2003) explains that democratic processes in the classroom include voting and the forming of committees. From observations and document review at both the schools, it was clear that there were various committees in place. Some of these included different learning area committees, committees for various codes of sport, a finance committee and discipline committee. The principal at Excell Secondary School maintained:

> So as leaders we must also be mindful of empowering others. But not only empowering but giving respect …. You do not create committees and undermine it. It's a very undemocratic practice ….

This implies that he delegates power and has faith and trust in these committees such that he will not undermine the decisions made.

Our key question as to whether schools prepare students for democracy is how many are able to participate in committees, councils and forums, and what they learn from such participation. At both schools the peer mediators replaced the prefect system. The grade 11 learners were allowed to apply for the positions of peer mediators. These learners formed various committees, which included sports, environment and learner welfare. Learners then organized activities and events for other learners of the school with guidance from teachers. These learners were not only provided with opportunities for leadership roles but they were able to link the school with wider community projects such as drug awareness. Yet it has to be acknowledged that it was the teachers who selected the learners for mediators according to set criteria, rather than any direct democracy on the part of learners themselves. Key committees such as subject committees concerning the curriculum did not have any learner representation, or even any observation by the RCL, and a recommendation would be that such involvement should happen.

It was interesting that while the principal at Red Star Secondary School in his response regarding democracy included the 'committees set up by learners for numerous projects such as the school's feeding scheme and the eco project', none of the learner respondents made reference to these committees in their responses to this specific question. Perhaps they were unaware that such activity can contribute towards making the school democratic; or they felt the committees did not give participants much leverage. As has been found with pupil councils and committees in Europe (Davies and Kirkpatrick 2000), so much depends on how learners are chosen, how representatives use their role, whether they provide regular feedback to those not on councils or committees, and whether they are able to take part in major decision making.

Tokenistic committees may be fun to be on and give skills to those few people on them, but may not really foster a whole school democratic culture that prepares all pupils for active citizenship.

RESPECT, RIGHTS AND DIVERSITY

One aspect that was frequently mentioned in relation to these structures was, however, respect – respecting the decisions made by committees. In respecting the decisions of others, the notion of trust is created. The belief that individuals have a right to be treated respectfully was a common characteristic acknowledged by respondents in both schools. This is evident in the explanation provided by parent 2 at Excell Secondary School:

> Respect as I said is also important. Not only is it important to respect the opinion of others but it is important to also respect the individual. In a democratic school respecting the rights and dignity of others is necessary. There should be respect between teachers, learners and parents.

Here, respect is linked to rights and dignity as outlined in the Constitution. Snauwaert (2002) posits that democracies advance the idea that all individuals possess an equal inherent dignity or worth. Dworkin *et al.* (2003) emphasize the need for mutual respect between teachers and parents as well as mutual respect between teachers and learners.

The South African Constitution (RSA 1996a) reflects universal democratic principles such as equality, respect and accountability. Moreover, it includes a well-established Bill of Rights that outlines the rights of South African citizens. Democratic schools recognize the value and rights of each individual (Nugent and Mooney 2008). Kelly (1995) refers to human rights as a basic principle of education in a democratic society that is of significance to democratic schools. In our schools, the participants referred to the rights of the various stakeholders. For example, parent 1 at Red Star Secondary School maintained: 'To our principal the rights and views of everyone must be taken into account, and the dignity of all parties preserved.' Both principals emphasized respect for others as well as the need to respect the rights of others.

Such rights were recognised as relating to diversity. The Constitution recognizes diversity of culture, religion and language, and most importantly promotes respect for such diversity. Discrimination is forbidden. Parent 2 at Red Star Secondary School included the point that all individuals should be treated equally irrespective of the socio-economic background, 'race' or gender. Another respondent (teacher 1 at Excell Secondary School) mentioned that democratic schools embrace diversity. Learner 1 at Red Star Secondary School commented: 'In making a school democratic a principal should be open to talk and interact with anyone of any race group, gender, or religious preference.'

The learner's response accentuates the notion of the principal in a democratic school promoting fair and non-discriminatory practices (as of course should all members of the school). Similar thoughts are put forth by MacBeath (2004), who explains that in a

democratic school the emphasis is on the equal value of all people, irrespective of gender and background. Interestingly, the various stakeholders at both the sample schools claimed that their principal embraced diversity. One example might be that at both these schools Muslim male learners sought permission to be excused from school on specific days, so that they could memorize the holy book and both these principals consented. One might raise a query about why Muslim female learners were not accorded the same privilege, but that is perhaps a different issue. An Excell Secondary School teacher representative commented:

> Well I must emphasize that our interactions are based not only on trust but there is respect for the rights and dignity of those involved. The interests of all learners always take precedence. He [the principal] reminds us that we as classroom managers are ultimately responsible for our actions in the classroom. Our principal ensures that we are all treated equitably. His belief is that we all should be treated fairly. There are equal opportunities for all members of staff to get involved in the running of the school. Even with gender equity one of his deputy principals is a female. Issues of gender bias or gender discrimination have not been an issue at our school. I would say that our principal recognizes our diversity and embraces our differences. He strives to create an environment that is free of discrimination. He embraces cultural diversity with regard to our learners and educators.

The parent representative at Excell Secondary School extended the idea of the principal embracing diversity:

> He [the principal] is making every effort to ensure that the staff for example is made up of people from the different racial groups. Bearing in mind that this school was previously a so-called Indian school, he played a pivotal role in ensuring that learners of colour are enrolled from the neighbouring areas. Many African staff members have been recruited and there are also white educators who are members of staff.

Admissions policies and staff recruitment are good indicators of attempts at equity, which is one of the foundations of democracy for many writers.

CRITICAL THINKING AND OPENNESS

Naicker (2006) elaborates how the South African apartheid education doctrine emphasized control and an authoritarian approach to teaching and learning. Thus, unlike education during the apartheid years that perpetuated separateness, the new regime was teacher centred and content driven, and outcomes-based education, according to Van der Horst and McDonald (1997), aims at developing learners into critical thinkers who would analyse, engage in problem solving and contribute to a democratic society.

An important part of participating in a democracy is the skill and habit of critical thinking. This provides the 'informed choice', which is another of the four cornerstones of democracy for Mncube and Harber (2010). Choosing representatives, voting in

elections, participating in committees, all require access to good information for that choice to be a real one, for alternatives to be weighed up critically. The respondents at both of the schools also referred to critical thinking as being necessary in a democratic school. Learner 3 at Red Star Secondary School was of the opinion that democratic schools promote critical thinking. Learners should 'question things and not just accept things the way they are … be open to the ideas and views that others have'. The learner is suggesting that critical thinking involves considering alternative views. Learner 2 at the same school expounded:

> Basically democratic schools encourage critical thinking as this is a good way to solve problems and everyone looks at the best way to solve a problem. They look at it from different angles and in that way you cover possible ways of solving the problem.

This learner is associating critical thinking with problem solving, as it involves everyone reflecting on an issue. This matches Frank and Huddleston's (2009) contention that critical thinking is a precondition for participating in democratic processes. Frank and Huddleston argue that critical thinking involves the skills of discussion and debate, including advocacy, argument and negotiation. Thinking critically exposes individuals to the views and varied perspectives held by others. This is underscored by many writers on democracy in education (Beane and Apple 1999, Inman and Burke 2002; Mncube and Harber 2010).

At Excell Secondary School teacher 1 acknowledged that a democratic school promotes critical thinking but also emphasized the need for the development of logical argument. Furthermore the teacher stated that, 'To critical thinking I would add openness and again individuals should appreciate and respect the views of others.' The respondent suggests that critical thinking encourages open-mindedness, and the notion of respecting others' views emerges again. Furthermore this teacher maintained that

> trust, transparency and openness feature in a democratic school. All role players must trust each other and hence have faith in each other. Transparency is vital so that all partners are aware of what is going on as well as no-one will feel prejudiced. Transparency and openness lends itself to all individuals being treated equally …. All stakeholders must be able to share opinions, which can be debated, and outcomes accepted.

Significantly, this teacher puts together a large mix of ingredients for a democratic school: trust, integrity, faith in others, transparency and openness. In keeping with this view, Bryk and Schneider (2003) contend that integrity is an important component of trust and is the bedrock of collaboration. Integrity contributes to trust and both are vital to teamwork and collaboration. Apple and Beane (2007) point out that collaboration is the foundation of democracy itself, but elaborate that democratic schools emphasize faith in the potential of individuals to find solutions to problems (Beane and Apple 1999). Exposure to different, alternative ideas is also seen as crucial in the challenge to extremism (Davies 2008). 'Respect' here does not mean unquestioningly respecting the

sole voice of authority (whether political, religious or educational), but giving critical attention to diverse voices and solutions. This in turn entails the opportunity to hear and be exposed to these – hence transparency and the free flow of information, as McQuiod-Mason *et al.* (2004) and Kensler (2010) point out.

Clearly, this means broadening the scope of learning and interaction. Teacher 1 at Excell Secondary School included community involvement. He felt that:

> There should be an interaction between the community and the school because the school is an important part of the community. What is also important to note is that the school cannot function on its own as a separate entity. It has to be connected to the community in which it is located.

Ultimately in a democratic school the interrelatedness between the school and the community is accentuated and the school and the community work in tandem. However, Red Star Secondary School teacher 2 suggested that it is essential for the community in which the school is located to promote democratic practices as well. Schools need to see themselves as 'part of a larger community with the emphasis on cooperation and collaboration' (Mncube and Harber 2010: 617). Kluth (2005) elaborates how in democratic schools learners are not only connected to one another, but to the immediate neighbourhood and wider community. We would argue that schools can model democracy and non-violent solutions to problems for the community as well as, in turn, draw on community resources.

GAPS AND CONSTRAINTS IN DEMOCRACY

This leads to the final question of what was not mentioned much in responses about democracy. While conventional definitions of democracy include making progress through consent rather than violence, and violence is an ever-present threat in South Africa, it was not mentioned as such by participants. One might have expected something on this with regard to codes of conduct, or the disciplinary committee.

The teacher representative at Excell Secondary School corroborated the comment about minimal learner participation at the SGB meetings by explaining:

> [L]earners do not make input on all policy issues. When it came to uniform, when it came to matters that deals with the learners we had to get input from them as well so it was taken into account. When it comes to the school code of conduct for learners I must say that this is not always done … in consultation with both parents and learners. Perhaps we need to focus on all stakeholders getting involved in formulating this document.

This might explain why behaviour is not seen by learners as part of democracy. One learner at Red Star Secondary School explained:

> … the school code of conduct and the school rules are also guided by the Constitution of our country. But from my knowledge I don't think the learners really have a say in the code of conduct or school rules.

Even at Excell Secondary School the learner representative stated: 'Like school rules, we don't have a choice …. We give input only on class rules.' It would seem vital, however, that learners participate in understanding and formulating how rights and respect translate into behaviour towards others, and understand their own responsibility in conduct, rather than be subject to top-down rules. Research across different countries on learners being involved in school codes of conduct, or setting up their own behaviour panels, or tackling violence by peers (or teachers) shows conclusively that behaviour improves and that rights to dignity for all are more likely to be upheld (Save the Children 2012; Yamashita and Davies 2010) .

Also, surprisingly, within the notion of democratic schools very little emphasis was placed on the voting process. Perhaps this is because the respondents view democracy as more than just a political system, or not much voting occurred in the schools with regard to positions of power, by learners or teachers. What mentioned there was related to the notion of learner-centred learning. One learner at Red Star recounted:

> There is a lot of interaction, speaking, demonstrating and having an all-round constructive lesson. We go above and beyond – thinking outside of the box. We are allowed to voice our opinions in having constructive debates and talks …. During class time when a decision is needed to be made, teachers allow us to take a vote and they do not decide for us.

Admittedly, at both the case study schools there were mixed responses with regard to the learner-centred teaching. One parent talked about 'regurgitation' with regard to teaching. At Red Star Secondary School the principal emphasized the need to complete the syllabus and assessments. He was of the opinion that these issues placed a strain on learner-centred teaching. The principal at Excell Secondary School reiterated similar feelings by explaining that the notion of learner centeredness was difficult to put into practice. Most respondents felt strongly that the current curriculum was prescriptive and the principal at Red Star Secondary School referred to the 'lack of a consultative process into curriculum design'. In other words, he was suggesting that the various stakeholders, namely the parents, learners and teachers did not engage in the design of the curriculum. The learner representative at Red Star Secondary School also added, "Like the curriculum is already set – many of our projects and assignments are already set for us."

It is clear that outside constraints of curriculum and examinations do place limits on democratic decision making in schools for teachers as well as learners. Yet this does not mean giving up. The principal of Excell Secondary School commented:

> Democracy is an ideology that contributes to a culture …. A democracy is only as thriving as its people …. You nurture democracy and you protect it because if you don't protect it somebody is going to abuse it.

The protection of democracy in a school, and acknowledging that it is a constantly ongoing project, is perhaps the key principle.

CONCLUSION

In summary, the responses have revealed many similarities between the two schools. With reference to the participants' espoused notion of democratic schooling at both schools, various democratic principles were alluded to. These were seen at many points to emphasize and implement the democratic principles as mirrored in the Constitution of the RSA. From the responses, it is evident that the respondents have moved away from a narrow conceptualization of a democratic school that focuses predominantly on electoral processes and instead included aspects such as collective decision making, consultation, rights, respect and equity – the thick or social conception. Constraints on democracy would still be the traditional conceptions of the child/learner not being suitable to participate in the major decision areas of the school, for example around teaching and learning, or behavioural codes. Constraints would also include how to gain experience in democracy – that for learners in particular, there needs to be skills training, and time given to learning how to do democracy in different spaces. Yet the potentialities are there, both in the structures of representation and committee participation, and in the emphasis given to critical thinking in the classroom. The latter is important in being able to reach every learner, not just those on official bodies. These schools have shown that to understand what democracy means, we need to move beyond the abstract and practice democracy, which will imply everyone living it.

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