

Enablers of learner leadership development in education

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Abstract

The Namibian Basic Education Act No 3 of 2020 mandates schools to establish Learner Representative Councils. Learner Representative Councils are management bodies at schools comprised of learner leaders, as supporting leaders to the overall school leadership. The purpose of the study was to establish the practices conducive to the development of learner leadership in schools as required by statutory instruments. A case study design was used for the study, involving a school principal, teachers and learners in Oshana Region. All participants were selected using purposive sampling technique. The data was collected using document analysis, semi-structured questionnaires and interviews. The collected data was analysed using thematic analysis method.

The study found that learner leadership is developed through a spirit of cooperation between different members of the school community. Cooperation helps learner leaders to execute their responsibilities successfully. In addition, conducting meeting with Learner Representative Council members is an important enabler for developing learner leaders, as the platform allows learner leaders to express applause, concerns and leadership aspirations, and to obtain guidance and mentorship from senior leaders. The finding also revealed that leadership development is nurtured through appropriate training interventions vested upon learner leaders to groom their skills and attitudes for improved leadership performance. The study concluded that learner leadership is an essential component of school leadership structure, requiring school authorities to be mindful of the factors essential for developing learner leadership structures, so that the structures are fully established and empowered to deliver outcomes as expected.

Keywords: Learner Leadership, Learner Representative Council, Leadership, Management, Learner Voice, Learner Leader, Leadership Development

1. Introduction

1. Background of the Study

Since the era of post-independence, the government of the Republic of Namibia has embarked upon legislative instruments and policy frameworks aimed at improving the management and leadership endeavours of education among schools. Among others, these instruments include a policy document titled Towards Education for all, the Basic Education Act and its Regulations, as well as the school clustering system. The instruments strive for a democratic education system organised around broader participation in decision-making by all education stakeholders. In ensuring broad participation in school leadership, the Namibian Education Act No. 3 of 2020, makes provision for the establishment of Learner Representative Councils (LRCs) at all government funded secondary schools (Namibia. MoEAC, 2020) [18]. The LRC is the highest body of elected leaders of learners at school and that liaise between learners and school management. The body symbolises democracy at school and encourage participation of learners in school activities which align with policy imperatives.

In support of broad participation in school leadership, contemporary leadership theories also embrace the participation of learners in the governance and management of schools. The theory of distributed leadership advocates for shared leadership in organisations (Gronn, 2008) [9]. Distributed leadership allows all stakeholders, including learners in a school context, to share the responsibilities and work towards a common goal. Distributed leadership

nurtures leadership development in learners and provides a platform for learners' voice to be heard, respected and counted on (Grant & Nekondo, 2016) [8]. Giving learners a voice to be heard in schools through learner leadership interventions presents numerous benefits (Mitra, 2007 [16]. Hine, 2011) [11]. Learner leadership has the potential to improve learner academic results and school reconstruction through shared leadership.

Giving learners an opportunity to lead, and hearing learners' voice in school affairs, engenders a sense of pride in their school as they start to feel that they are really part of the school and their contribution is valued and counted on. Learner leadership can also provide adults with valuable insights into the dynamics of the school, through the lens of learners. The valuable insights help to ensure a balanced and holistic understanding of the dynamics facing schools. Scholarships have proven that learners who have limited opportunities for democratic voice in the educational process, feel their lives, beliefs and hopes are under-valued by schooling and hence develop hostility towards school (Grant, 2015) [7]. Learner voice thus plays a very significant role, as it offers real democratic values within schools, leading to active learner participation in the development of their schools.

It becomes clear that learner leadership is an essential component of school management and leadership. Even though the significance of involving learners in the management and leadership of the school is well established in literature, little is known about the exact practices that

can help to sustain learner leadership structures in schools so that their existence remains bold, visible and effective. The absence of empirical evidence in respect of the practices required to develop learner leadership in schools, necessitated this empirical study to establish the essential practices that schools can capitalise on in order to strengthen their learner leadership structures so that learner leaders are energised to perform their leadership responsibilities successfully. The next section presents the methodology used for the study.

2. Research Methodology

The methods and techniques used for the study are described according to the following outline:

2.1 Research Design

A qualitative research approach was used for the study, whose empirical investigation made use of a case study design, as an intensive analysis and description of a single phenomenon for enriched understanding of what is going on with the phenomenon being studied (Simons, 2009^[20]. Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000)^[3]. The case study design was an ideal research design to use as the researchers intended to get intensive description of the management and leadership roles of LRC members. Case study designs enabled researchers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how participants relates to the subject being studied, and how they interact with each other in their specific setting (Maree, 2007^[13]. Simons, 2009)^[20]. The interaction with different teachers and learners brought multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of learner leadership and management roles in a real-life context.

Since case study help researchers set boundary for their studies (Berg, 2001)^[1], the researchers were able to focus on a particular, specific group of learners which was the LRC members. The set boundaries helped researchers to concentrate and focus on the participants and the essential functions of the members of the LRC. In addition, the flexibility inherent in case study designs (Maree, 2007)^[13], allowed the study to be conducted for numerous days and collected data at different times and places during the research for richer analysis and enriched understanding of the phenomenon which was studied. The flexibility also allowed researchers to use multiple sources of data and different techniques in the data gathering process, which enhanced the validity of the data collected and subsequent results. The next section presents the research site and participants of the study.

2.2 Sampling and Participants

There were a total of seventeen participants in this research, comprised of twelve LRC members at the school, who were all learners and were considered the primary participants; two other learners who were class monitors and were involved in piloting the questionnaires; the School Principal, a Head of Department (HoD), and the Liaison teacher for the LRC. Purposive sampling was used as a sampling technique for the researchers to select individuals for the sample, depending on the typical characteristics that the researchers were looking for (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009)^[5]. The criteria that informed sampling included leadership positions, leadership potential and the ability to provide insight into the phenomenon of the study. Purposive

sampling made it possible to choose participants that were knowledgeable of the data needed for the study (Maree, 2007)^[13]. LRC members were chosen because they were the prime focus of the study. The principal and the HoD were better positioned in the school management and were thus knowledgeable of the management and leadership roles and practices at school. The Liaison teacher was a focal teacher to the LRC members, charged with the function of mentoring, coaching and guiding LRC members within the school, thus knowledgeable of their roles. The purposive nature of the sampling decisions in respect of the research site and participants enabled researchers to obtain the richest possible source of information fit for addressing the intents of the study. The data was collected with the data collection techniques as described in the following section.

2.3 Data collection techniques

The data for the study was collected using document analysis, semi-structured questionnaires, interviews, observation and journaling. The range of data collection tools was valuable for the study, as it allowed the methods to offset their respective weaknesses and capitalise on their individual strengths. The counter balance that comes with multiple methods provided rich and meaningful data for analysis and presentation. With the permission of participants, an audio recorder and camera were used for data capturing. The specific data collection techniques are detailed next

Document analysis

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing and evaluating relevant printed and electronic material for extracting information useful for answering the research questions (Bowen, 2009). Specific documents were analysed in order to gather evident information on leadership opportunities and roles that existed at the school. The document analysis further provided researchers with useful insights of the school, which then informed the planning, design and administration of other data collection techniques.

Semi-structured questionnaires

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014)^[2], a semi-structured questionnaire has a degree of open-ended questions that participants may answer as they like, in the space reserved. The purpose of the semi-structured questionnaire is to enable the researchers to standardise the questions asked, while at the same time control the amount of information that respondents provides (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014)^[2]. All twelve LRC members were given the questionnaires and they provided a "written collection of self-report" based on the questions (Gay *et al.*, 2009, p. 373)^[5]. The questions revolved around the role of learner leaders at school.

Individual interviews

Thomas (2009)^[21], defines interviews as a discussion with someone from which the researcher tries to get information useful for answering the research questions. Interview is a conversation with a purpose of obtaining needed information. Interview enable participants to discuss their interpretation of the world in which they live, and to express to the researchers how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011)^[4]. Semi-

structured interviews were conducted with the Liaison teacher, Head of Department and School Principal. Interviewing teachers assisted in gathering an understanding of teachers on the subject of learner leadership and their roles at school, as well as obtaining essential information on leadership opportunities at school. As the interview was used with other methods in the gathering of data, it enabled triangulation of the data collected. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provide opportunities to ask the prepared questions according to the interview schedule, while at the same time gave the benefit of probing from participants for clarifications (Thomas, 2009) ^[21]. The interview allowed researchers to probe for detailed information on the management and leadership roles of learner leaders at the case study school. The next section describes the analysis of the data that was collected.

2.4 Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data collected (Merriam, 1998) ^[14]. Data analysis involves the researchers conducting a data reduction process by selecting, simplifying and transforming the raw data as gathered in the field (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014) ^[2]. The data collected was analysed inductively, by establishing themes. During the inductive thematic analysis, the raw data was examined, labeled and coded according to the responses of the respective research questions (Rule & John, 2011) ^[19]. The data set were coded on sticky notes which were later pasted into a visual form for an enriched understanding of emergent findings.

The coded portions of data were then grouped logically into categories, which were constructed based on patterns and similarities emerging from data (Merriam, 1998) ^[14]. Thereafter, themes were created as research findings. After creating themes, the researchers scanned through the data again several times to look for other pertinent information that could enhanced the interpretation, and in the process, more categories were formed for a richer interpretation and discussion processes (Lichtman, 2014) ^[12]. The themes were interpreted and discussed drawing useful insights from the theoretical frameworks, citing empirical evidence as reviewed and backing up the discussions with verbatim excerpts of the participants. Relating the discussion to the theories helped to validate the theoretical framework as adopted as well as confirming the correctness of the literature reviewed as it correlated with current research establishments. The trustworthiness of the results was established through the measures described in the following section.

2.5 Trustworthiness of Findings

To ensure the credibility of the results, the study collected sufficient data using multiple data collection technique and the resultant discussions provided were rigorous enough to provide convincing justifications. Two class monitors were given questionnaires prior to the main study as piloting. The piloting was done with the intention “to check for clarity and to remove ambiguities” in the data collection technique (Cohen *et al.*, 2011, p. 402) ^[4]. Elimination of ambiguities in the data collection techniques means that the questions were refined and clearly understood by the respondents and correct answers were thus provided. Interviews were recorded and the participants were given an opportunity to change any wording that they felt did not capture the

exactness of their words and intentions. A very good rapport was built with the participants before the commencement of the interviews, which ensured that participants were open to express their ideas freely to the researchers. The use of data triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods to collect data, strengthened the validity of the qualitative data (Gay *et al.*, 2009) ^[5]. The data sets were corroborated by relating findings from one data collection technique to the data collected with another technique (van der Mescht, 2002) ^[23]. Collaboration ensured congruence of the data, eventually producing results that draws on the strengths of individual data collection techniques as used.

2.6 Ethical Considerations

All the participants were treated with respect and dignity. The researchers explained all the details related to the study to the participants so that participants were well informed with the intentions of the study, to enable them to make an informed, deliberate and conscious decision whether to participate in the study or not. Permission to research sites was obtained. A “permission to conduct research in a school does not substitute the informed consent of parents” (Wassenaar, 2007, p. 73) ^[24]. Hence, informed consents were obtained from the parents and teachers as well as assenting from learners.

As the participants indicated that they wished to have their true identities concealed, pseudonyms were used for the both the school and the participants in the reporting of the findings. In the reporting of the research, the interview with the mentor teacher is captured as IMT, interview with the school principal is captured as IPR, and the interview with the Head of Department is captured as IHOD. The questionnaires that were administered to respective LRC members are captured as LQ1-12. Findings collected with different techniques were also coded differently, such as DA1-7 for document analysis, JE1-7 for journal entries and OBN1-2 for observation notes. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of the data and were assured that the data would not be made public, and will be stored in a locked desk drawer and backed up as soft (digital) copies and saved on the cloud. The next section presents the discussions of the findings that were established.

3. Discussion of Findings

The aim of the study was to develop leadership in the LRC structure. Hence, the study sought to establish practices that can promote the development and sustainability of learner leadership in schools. The data was analysed inductively and generated thematic areas as enablers for developing learner leaders in schools. The themes relate to cooperation with other learners, conducting meetings with LRC members and training provisions for LRC members. The themes are discussed next.

3.1 Cooperation

Cooperation as the spirit of working together is one of the important enablers of learner leadership. Cooperation between the LRC members and other learners has helped in developing learner leadership significantly. The members of the sample hailed cooperation as one of the factor that has polished LRC members to effectively perform their roles as leaders at school. The LRC members testified that the “good cooperation between them and other learners made it easier for them to plan and organise events”. The LRC members

organised various events and “they were all well received quite well..., the class tournament went well, the musical show was good, and the cleaning campaign went quite well – as well as all the initiatives went well”. The events that LRC members initiated were able to be conducted as planned because of the spirit of working together that existed between the LRC members and other learners, in addition to approval from senior school management. Teachers at school were very grateful of the spirit of cooperation that was being manifested between LRC members and other learners.

The cooperation between learners in preparing the events is quite good, as “you may know that learners like those events, and it was a good initiative and you can see the way they did it, I think the whole school participated”. The spirit of cooperation within the school enabled LRC members to develop into capable leaders. Learners did not only enjoy the events, but they helped in executing different tasks meant to contribute to the success of the events. For example, during the planning of Miss Valentine’s day different tasks were carried out by different learners. It was observed and noted that learners who were good at drawing helped the LRC to design advertorial posters for the event. On the day of the event, some learners cleaned and organised the chairs in the hall. Some decorated the hall and put newspaper at the windows to keep the light out. Some facilitated other logistics for the event such as directing other learners when they were entering the hall and collecting the entrance fees. The idea of different tasks executed by various people as a symbol of cooperation, equally resonates well with distributed leadership which advocates for involvement and engagement of the expertise within a school, instead of looking for experts outside the school (Grant, 2008) ^[6]. The cooperation allows a network of individuals to pool their expertise together for a common cause (Harris, 2004) ^[10]. Therefore cooperation helps to uncover the leadership potentials among learners at school. The LRC members further expressed that in order to “make other learners cooperative during planned activities, the shows and tournaments were announced a week or two in advance”. The early announcements gave learners a chance “to source funds for the entrance fees, as it was noted that when learners have money for the events, they cooperated”. One of the learners indicated that if the event was not announced earlier, “it might fail because those who could not find finances in a short time would end up disturbing those who were watching the event”. LRC members also cooperated with outsiders by sourcing resources that were essential for the success of the event. It was noted that “during the organising of Miss Valentine, the LRC members cooperated with some outsiders, who eventually provided clothes that the participants in the pageant wore during the show.

The fact that LRC members foreseen challenges and took appropriate measures such as early announcements of events to subvert disturbances and promote cooperation, as well as partnering with external agents for sponsorship, proves how capable learner leaders were in executing their responsibilities. Hence cooperation between LRC members and other learners, the teachers and the external school community have indeed developed learner leaders into able leaders, who can be relied on, not only in the school but in the community as well. The next section discuss meetings as a factor of leadership development.

3.2 Meetings

Frequent meetings with learner leaders are essential for mentoring and coaching in order to develop the learners’ leadership capabilities. Meetings were conducted regularly where LRC members were “motivated and encouraged in their leadership functions”. Meetings served as a platform where the mentor teacher “motivated LRC members and gave them any support or any guidance which they may require”. Meetings are good avenues where LRC members can discuss problems encountered in the school and suggesting possible ways to address them. Meetings provided a good platform for the development of the LRC voice, it promotes an engagement between learners and adults to make changes both internal and external to their school (Mitra & Gross, 2009) ^[15]. Similarly, the LRC meetings provided a good platform for communication between the LRC members with anyone who was entrusted with the conduct of the meetings. Giving learners a voice leads to learner participation in developing their schools (Grant, 2015) ^[7]. Meetings also provides teachers as adults with valuable insights into the dynamics of the school, through the lens of the learners (Hine, 2011) ^[11]. During these meetings, the learners were able to identify potential stumbling blocks to leadership and how these obstacles could be challenged and overcome (Mitra, 2007 ^[16], Udjombala, 2006) ^[22]. Hence, meetings is one of the important factor that enables the development of learner leaders into capable leaders at school. Although meeting is an enabling factor to learner development, there was still room to strengthen and improve the meetings. Having attended one of the LRC meetings, it was noted that “the mentor teacher chaired the meeting and was more focused on planning the initiatives of the council and discussing the LRC roles rather than giving the LRC an opportunity to really discuss and initiate new ideas”. Therefore, regulations on the establishment of learner leadership at schools requires a selection of one of the learner as a chairperson, who should then chair the meetings and lead the agenda (Namibia. MBESC, 2002) ^[17]. Although the school documents were analysed, there was no evidence of other LRC meetings apart from the one the researchers attended. The literature emphasises that the LRC members must hold at least two meetings during each school term. In addition, the secretary of the LRC must keep minutes of the proceedings of all LRC meetings (ibid.). In essence, although meetings promoted leadership development among learners, there was a need for meetings to be conducted frequently in order become an effective enabler of leadership development. The next section discuss training as enabling factor for leadership development among learners.

3.3 Training

The study established that learner leaders were developed into capable leaders through training provisions. The findings indicated that the training offered to the LRC members developed their leadership skills. Various participants testified that training enhanced the leadership skills of learner leaders. LRC members were “coached and empowered through the training exercises in their respective leadership portfolios”. The principal stated that “all the LRC members were given training on teamwork and building confidence at the beginning of the year”. Providing training to learner leaders at the beginning of the year helps to ensure that learner leaders were prepared to face the

leadership challenges in the course of the year. Training is essential for improving knowledge, skills and attitudes in the trainee, which can result in increased confidence, high motivation and commitment to work (Udjombala, 2006) [22]. The training provided to the learner leaders has benefited them significantly. Teachers noted that the LRC members were “more active, their self-esteem was raised” and they had “brought tangible changes in the school after their training”. The findings of document analysis revealed that the “LRC members were seeking funds to repaint toilets in the school”. In addition, they were at an advanced stage to “open a tuck shop at the school”. The tuck shop was meant to “generate extra money for the school” and at the same time, it would end the practice of hawkers selling under the trees at the school. The learner leaders were able to initiate the required changes as a result of being trained, as training is well known for modifying the attitudes, skills and behaviour of a person, resulting in improved abilities as well as effective performance (Udjombala, 2006) [22]. Hence, as a result of training interventions, learner leaders became more initiative and innovative in the performance of their leadership responsibilities at school.

Even though training is deemed essential for developing leadership, a lot is desired to make training an effective enablers of leadership development. The training provisions were characterised by certain limitation at the case study school. It was noted that only “four members of the council were trained in Okahandja”, who were the “Head girl, Head boy and their deputies”. In addition, the analysis of documents revealed that a “one-week training took place in a town about 600 kilometres away from the school, that was offered by a leadership institute”. The exclusive nature of training attendants has the potential to delimit the leadership potential of other members of the council. In addition, training facilitated by outsiders who are not familiar with the school environment, may provide learner leaders with leadership insights and examples that are not practical and contextual to their own school settings. Such implications can inhibit the potential for training to become an effective enabler of learner leadership development in schools.

4. Conclusion

The significance of learner leadership cannot be emphasised. It becomes clear that learner leaders play significant management and leadership roles in schools. It is therefore important to develop learner leaders appropriately so that they can execute their responsibilities competently, and with ease, passion and success. An understanding of the factors essential for developing learner leaders is important so that educational authorities can nurture these factors efficiently and effectively to achieve capable and competent learner leaders in schools. Factors such as good cooperation is fundamental in the collective achievement of any set goals. Without a cooperative school community, whether internal and external, learner leaders will not be able to execute their duties successfully and attain set goals. Therefore, the spirit of cooperation should be promoted among schools on which learner leaders can capitalise in proving their leadership capabilities. Regarding meetings, any development intervention requires a platform for engagement to reflect of the past, present and future state of affairs. Learner leaders should be provided with platforms such as meetings and briefs in order for them to raise their satisfactions, frustrations and aspirations to senior school

managements. Without platforms for engagements, learner leaders may remain frustrated with issues that may remain unresolved, and becoming unproductive in the execution of their responsibilities. Meetings should be conducted with learner leaders frequently in order to address issues as they raise, so that such issues do not impinge on the capability of the learner leaders to deliver expected outcomes.

Training as one of the enablers of leadership development, requires school authorities to ensure that learner leaders are appropriately trained in their respective leadership portfolios. Training helps to ensure that learner leaders are capacitated to execute their duties competently and successfully. It is important to provide contextual training, a training that is relevant to the context or school setting that the learner leaders are familiar with, so that they can apply the skills appropriately and successfully. In addition, training should be an on-going process and not a once-off event, in order to ensure that learner leaders are continuously updated with latest leadership trends relative to their portfolios.

Overall, this study established a theoretical framework for developing learner leadership in schools. Most schools establish learner leadership structures as required by the law. However, these structures often fails to deliver expectations due to shortfalls related to its development as a leadership component in the leadership structure of the school. Being aware of the enablers of leadership development can help schools benchmark the development of their elected learner leadership component, in order to make learner leaders effective in their responsibilities.

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