

*Full Length Research Paper*

# Democratic involvement of students in high school governance in Lesotho

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This paper is premised on the thesis that there is importance and necessity of involving high school students in school governance in Lesotho as well as consideration of cultural values' impact on this issue. The possibilities and limits of involving the high school students in school governance in Lesotho are examined. There are two opposing positions: some feel that such an exercise is right while others regard it to be wrong and should not be tried. The paper reaffirms that cultural values are highly regarded in Lesotho. But notably that students should participate in decision making in their schools is a rational idea because it means moulding future leaders who will become better citizens with decision making capacity that will benefit their communities in Lesotho. This study is indeed, necessary because this is a time when the very meaning of democracy and citizenship is contested (Arnot and Dillabough 2000). Furthermore, this is in line with Lesotho Vision 2020 goal that emphasizes wide influence of Lesotho to have strong leadership and democracy in the context of Africa and world at large.

**Key words:** Democratic involvement of students in high school governance.

## INTRODUCTION

### Research on students' democratic involvement in school governance.

The issue of students' involvement in school government is very crucial in the smooth running of today's schools in Lesotho. When other countries like Republic of South Africa involve students in school governing bodies, the present practice in Lesotho does not allow students to be members of school boards. In Lesotho high school governance parents are the ones who represent students in the boards in which decisions to run the schools, are made.

The reasons advocated for involvement of students in high school governance are: first, the present schools

exist in a democratic era and the term democracy implies participation of all stakeholders in matters that affect them. So the understanding is that high school students are stakeholders in their own right and as such are entitled to be presented in school boards not to be represented by their parents. Second, their involvement in school boards is hoped to minimise perpetual strikes that are so imminent in schools in Lesotho. Strikes result in vandalism, injuries and sometimes deaths. It is believed that if students are part of governing bodies, they would be part of decisions made to run the schools hence they would have ownership of such decisions and obviously stand a better chance to convince fellow members of student body about good intentions of decisions from

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the board. Third, if high school students learn to make decisions by being members of their school board at early stage of their life, the understanding is to breed good future leaders who will be better citizens with decision-making capacity. The hackneyed statement “Practice makes perfect” would be in place and adhered to.

Total quality management advocates for involvement of all those who constitute stakeholders of a particular organization in decision-making processes and that are intended to run it. Principles of democratization of education are based and anchored on this process. Adult education as part of education in general, particularly has inherited this style of approach that values opinions of all members that are stakeholders of an organization. The underlying assumption is that the views of those at the lower echelons of the educational hierarchy may be very important for providing solutions to the problems and that, schools are a primary resource for developing new values. Based on this understanding it is assumed that if high schools in Lesotho could involve their students in decision-making, they would be abiding by democratic principles and ensuring democratic practices.

To get into details of the topic, the following three themes are discussed: arguments in favour of student involvement in school governance, arguments against student involvement in school governance and the influence of cultural values on student involvement in school governance.

The aim of this paper is to explore possibility of involving students in school governance by addressing questions in the following areas:

- Arguments relating to student involvement in school governance. There are two contending arguments around the issue of student involvement in school governance. Some people negate it while others advocate its trial in Lesotho. Is it necessary to involve students in school governance or not necessary because children are minors?
- Issue of cultural values: Scholars regard cultural values as the ones that mediate and determine the limit and extent to which students have to behave when involved in decision-making. What is the role of cultural values in the whole issue of student involvement in school governance in Lesotho?

## **METHODOLOGY**

This article, as indicated earlier in the introduction is based on the research that is quantitative in nature. A number of stakeholders in education were approached to inquire their perceptions on the topic as it stands.

### **Sample**

The final sample of this study totaled four hundred and

twenty-six. The sample included all the constituencies involved in the governance of a school. Ten schools were randomly selected: five in the rural areas and five in the urban areas. It was from each of these schools that twenty students (ten boys and ten girls), ten teachers (five males and five females) and five prefects (with a gender ratio of 3:2, with either gender constituting the larger number) were randomly selected. The principal of each schools was also included (n =10). In Lesotho, six churches own schools. These are the Roman Catholic Church (RC), the Lesotho Evangelical Church (LEC), the Anglican Church of Lesotho (ACL), the Methodist Church of Southern Africa (Meth), the Assemblies of God and the Apostolic Methodist Epistolic Church (AME). The six educational secretaries of these institutions were also included in the sample. In addition, ten government officials (five males and five females) were randomly selected from central and district educational offices.

In order to interview parents, the researcher had to approach one family after another, especially in the rural areas where people are scattered. In urban areas, it was easier to access and interview respondents in centres around shops. A total of fifty parents were interviewed (twenty-five males and twenty-five females).

## **Perceptions of respondents**

### **Perceptions of those who are in favour of student involvement in school governance.**

As mentioned previously, it is interesting to note that contrary to Lesotho government policy on school governance which does not allow students to be members of school committees or staff meetings, the majority of all respondents, except parents, support the involvement of students in school governance. For example, 60% of students indicated that, if chosen, they could represent other students in the board, 87% of teachers feel that it is necessary to involve students in decision-making, 89% of prefects suggest that students should be consulted and involved when decision in their schools are made, 60% of principals support the involvement of students in decision-making, 60% of government officials and 67% of educational secretaries argue that it is advantageous to involve students in school governance. Only 48% of parents support the idea. All these cohorts of respondents advanced reasons based on principles of democratic education which advocated the involvement of all stakeholders in decision-making that affects them as a way of enhancing good student-teacher relationship. The reasons given by each cohort are presented below:

### **Students**

1. It is the right of students to know what is said in the board because it affects them.

2. Students can learn procedures about how to make and assess decisions.
3. The board will know the students' needs and requirements and therefore act accordingly.
4. If students are involved, they cooperate fully when policies are implemented.
5. They learn responsibility and accountability when they participate in decision-making.

### **Prefects**

Prefects supported student involvement in school governance by indicating that their representation in boards and staff meetings would allow authorities to know what affects students.

### **Principals**

Principals advanced the following reasons:

1. Students develop positive attitudes towards their school and regard themselves as valued members of that community.
2. Students have a better understanding of matters related to their school particularly its administration.

### **Parents**

The forty-eight percent of parents who supported the idea of student involvement in school governance provided the following reasons:

1. The outcomes of decisions affect students and as such they need to be involved to avoid unnecessary resistance.
2. It is their opportunity to know and be part of decisions that are made. For example, they should know about budgets as this is the sole cause of strikes.
3. Students should be involved in the board in order to grow up with knowledge of how to make decisions and account for their consequences.

### **Government officials and educational secretaries**

Government officials and educational secretaries claimed that:

1. Students become active and supportive members of their school if they are involved in decision-making.
2. The undertaking promotes good teacher-pupils relationship and enhances good academic and governance results.
3. Students grow both mentally and academically sound as future democratic leaders.

All these reasons advanced by the respondents, as indicated earlier, embrace the importance of democratic involvement of students in school governance with the major aim of avoiding problems pertaining to discipline which are characterized by crime, vandalism and violence (McDaniel, 1981). A central theme derived from these reasons provided by respondents, is that students do not easily strike if they are involved in decision-making because they regard any such decisions as their own.

Positive responses were elicited from the majority of principals (60%), government officials (80%) and educational secretaries (66%) relating to whether there is relationship between disturbances in schools and the exclusion of students from decision-making process. These positive responses further highlighted an understanding of why students should be involved in school governance. It is obvious from these results that the majority do realise and confirm that the exclusion of students from decision-making is a situation that may result in disturbances in schools.

### **Perceptions of those who argue against student involvement in school governance**

Cultural values have some bearing on the reasons given by students (40%), teachers (13%), prefects (11%), principals (40%), government officials (40%), educational secretaries (23%) and parents (52%), as a source of not allowing students to be involved in decision-making. All responses emphasise that culturally it is not permissible to allow student participation because children are young and cannot be entrusted to make decisions while their parents are still there. These responses clearly show that the relationship between students and adults is based on the traditional cultural perceptions that students are children who are untrained. Thus, they have to obey instructions while adults are regarded as legitimate authority figures who have an inalienable right to make decisions.

### **Arguments in favour of student involvement in school governance**

Lifton (1970) has long advocated for the issue of involvement of students in their school governance by arguing that as future citizens, students need to be prepared for making sound decision. According to him they need to try-out experience in planning and decision-making that gives them the chance to feel some of the consequences of their actions. He maintains that they need to learn how to put job and self-knowledge together on their own, rather than to accept the interpretation of others. McDaniel (1981), Frymier (1980) and Bottery (1990) share with Lifton this notion of students' involvement in decision-making that concerns their schools.

McDaniel (1981) insists that power should be shared with students. Students should be helped to learn how to make decisions and take responsibility for the consequences of their decisions. By doing this, minimization of problems of crime, vandalism and violence will be ensured. Frymier (1980) also sees student responsibility as central to betterment of education. He claims that students should be helped to learn to choose wisely and well. Towing the same line Bottery (1990) cautions against the signs for immediate results. He claims that students take a long time to learn and initial failure by students should not be taken as an evidence of inability.

Adeyemi et al. (2003) also concur to the notion of student involvement by indicating that students engaged in service learning are challenged to exercise leadership and responsibility. They claim that citizenship education is something we learn, not something we merely inherit. Learners need to get involved in taking action that makes difference to others. They need to experience being part of the solution rather than remaining passive observers and listeners. While National Policy in Pakistan (1998 to 2010:5) in Dean (2005:38) suggests that education should strive to build up the characters of future generation so that they would possess the highest sense of honour, integrity, responsibility and selfless service to the Nation. This is the nature of future citizens we need in Lesotho.

Based on these arguments, this article stresses that a failure to expose student to the process of decision-making in the early years of their high school level in Lesotho, encourages docility, stereo-typing and blind acquiescence to authority. This is evidenced by students not participating in decision-making processes in Lesotho schools. Decisions are taken by their parents who are part of school structures referred to as school boards. Education Act No 3 of 2010 in Lesotho clearly indicates that students as part of stakeholders are not elected into being members of school boards. They, therefore, merely become recipients of either good or bad decisions made on their behalf by their authorities who constitute membership of the school boards. Above all students in Lesotho are indoctrinated to understand that culturally they are minors and decision-making is a realm designated for parents. It is solely regarded as a prerogative attributed to the parents and not the children.

The common sense use of the term democracy implies that the right and powers to make decisions in public matters does not reside in a single individual or a group or class of individuals but in each and every member. The basic democratic institution then is a general forum in which all may sit and speak. This means each member has a vote equal to that of his/her fellows (Baron 1981). Where the numbers of individuals or groups are too large, the vast majority is represented by others. This, in essence, means the majority exerts their right to being able to choose whom they wish to represent them in decision-making and being able to change their representatives at prescribed intervals (Baron 1981).

This further suggests ways in which the educational system in the new century could help develop genuinely inclusive democratic societies in which students and parents play an equal role in shaping the meaning of citizenship (Arnot and Dillabough 2000).

All these factors have particular relevance to schools and their governance in Lesotho. The schools currently function in a climate of great sensitivity with regards to practices that might be held to be discriminatory in respect of social classes. Teachers, parents and pupils seek greater access to information and less confidentiality (Baron 1981). It is also a matter of evidence that students support policies to which they have been co-opted to contribute (Gevisser and Morris 2001). So, to include students in decision-making is in a way a step towards establishing everlasting protection and smooth implementation of such policies with less fear of their violation and undermining by the same. The assumption is that the earlier students practice making decisions in high schools in Lesotho the better leaders they will become. We are concerned about the realization of democracy throughout the world. For democracy to be achieved, it must start from learning institutions such as the school. The school that inculcates democratic values and practices is in essence cultivating responsible leadership for the future.

The logic suggested here is that schools in Lesotho should allow horizontal communication, not through authoritative structures, but through spontaneous contacts that affect all constituencies, including students (Davies and Kirk Patrick 2000). These series of exchanges need to be formalized in the appropriate meetings in which proper guidance and counseling are advanced. This democratic relationship forms the basis of the forgoing argument of this article that participation of student's in their school governance is central to democratic citizenship in Lesotho.

There are numerous sound reasons for providing children with access to information that is essential for making and sharing decisions in schools (Dean 2005). This is done with an understanding that such transparency may help to circumvent the accusations made by rebelling students and the repercussions of their actions. School ought to be a place where people realize differences, accept them and master them. It should be a place to accept the dignity of individuals (Jensen and Walker 1989). The contention is that the role of the young, if they are to become adults who will make their own decision, is already to be making decisions and the best way to learn decision-making processes is by participating when such decisions are made (Calvert, 1975).

Rich and Books (1982) state that there are compelling needs to develop intellectual skills and concepts of civic competence in the adolescent in order that he/she successfully assumes his/her citizenship role in the community independently of parents. While van Zyl (1975) cautions that the child needs to set his/her foot in decisions that affect him/her and needs to determine his/her

own future.

This means time is now upon the schools in Lesotho to ensure that decisions are acceptable before they are ever made. All varied sections of stakeholders have to be involved and feel that they have been honoured to play some part in making decisions that affect them (Morris 1975). Arnot and Dillabough (2000) also contend that young people should be provided with an understanding of democracy and the choices that flow from it, the knowledge, understanding and power to make those choices positive, responsible and informed. They must be made to learn through actual practice and the promotion of active participation. This therefore, means schools in Lesotho should provide opportunities for students to develop decision-making skills by allowing them to be involved in structures such as school boards. This in essence will imply equitable treatment for all those who constitute stake holding in educational system and schools will become democratic in Lesotho.

### **Arguments against student involvement in school governance**

Those who oppose the involvement of students in decision-making in Lesotho have an alarmist position that students will have disproportionate amount of power and will control the governing of schools. Frymier (1980) agrees with them when he shows that because of lack of experience and childish world-view, students will bring their own agendas which tally with their interests. It is recognized that children have their own developmentally appropriate ways of seeing, thinking and feeling. It is true that inner life during childhood is essentially different from that of adults. In this case opponents to the idea of student involvement in decision-making, understand that it is quite possible that children may blunder a lot when exposed to this task.

In general, it is argued that these children are too young for such participation and will, therefore, do bad job of it. Dedrick and Foyen (1980) endorse this notion by indicating that adults should make decision for the youth. They claim that students should not be consulted because they are not competent to make judgments about schooling. It is believed that they will abuse any attempts made by teachers to involve them in decision-making.

This exercise in Lesotho is regarded as the realm of parents and teachers. It is seen as the sole prerogative of adults who are believed to have right reasoning power necessary for proper decision-making. Children in Lesotho are taken and treated as minors who have to be coerced in ways that are constant with approved ethical and moral standards. Blishen (1969) in Meigham (1986:33) rounds it all by saying, "you do not consult the clay about what kind of pot it wants to be".

But, however, in view of the changing world and the

multiplying problems in education, such as student strikes characterized by vandalism, gangerism and sometimes deaths, the author is inclined to believe that student involvement in decision-making is necessary in order to promote democratic participation in society and broadening understanding of democracy.

### **The Influence of cultural values on involvement of students in school governance**

Cultural values in Lesotho prohibit autonomous decision-making by children. What it means is that students' behaviour is controlled by value systems that prevail in their school environment. Perception is supported by traditional transmission educationists who insist that adults as representatives in Lesotho should take courage and resoluteness to stand firm against the clamouring of the youth to be free of adult constraints. They should not dance to the whims of children. The argument continues to show that cultural values constitute authority and authority determines the extent to which student behaviour should be allowed.

There are rules, norms and sanctions to control student behaviour or discipline. Discipline being the existence of orderly or prescribed conduct (Rich and Books 1982). This suggests that even if there could be a reasonable dialogue concerning decision-making, the moral authority of adults should not be compromised because if authority is lost or not respected there is going to be chaos. The loss of authority means absence of discipline and once there is no discipline there is going to be no control over the behaviour of students (Dedrick and Foyen 1980). As Ramphele (1992) states, the youth would assume enormous powers and become law unto themselves, reject authority of parents, schools and national structures. All in all, it means authority is the framework on which discipline rests (Rich and Books 1982).

It is true that being equal partners stimulates cooperation and contributes to concerted effort to achieve mutually agreed upon rules but the warning is that there should be limits on the freedom enjoyed by students and citizenship education is necessary to help them cope rightfully (Arke-Cobbah 2005). Students' actions should be controlled by rules which embrace the moral values, beliefs and attitudes of the society in which the school exists. It is correct expectation that the schools in Lesotho should produce an educated person who has to know the common culture, morals and mores which are crucial to the self and society (Meighan 1986).

What this means is that schools in Lesotho exist within the context of cultural values which are highly regarded by the society and as educational institutions, they should not only teach subjects' matter per se but also teach students even common culture, morals and mores which determine students' correct behavior even when they happen to be elected into being members of school

boards.

This again emphasizes the notion that schools are not isolated institutions which operate independently, but which function within the context of their social and community environments. The school milieu directly or indirectly dictates school processes and students' behaviour. When involved in governing bodies, students should understand that they are still children and should know their limits as stipulated by principles of norms and morals of their society and by so doing they will be conforming to disciplinary democracy (Abrahamsen 2000).

They are expected to respect adults and their authority and behave in an appropriate manner that is orderly when engaged in dialogue with them. An important issue to note is that the involvement of students in governing bodies is empowering students as future leaders. The transmission of powers and skills results when students are exposed to democratic role models, and are allowed as participants not only a voice in what happens but also an opportunity to develop and implement choices emanating from decisions they have made (Dick 1991).

Asmal (1999) also emphasizes the notion of learner's involvement in issues that concern them by indicating that values cannot simply be asserted, they must be put on the table, be debated, be negotiated, be synthesized, be modified, be earned in order that they truly and meaningfully constitute code of conduct that controls behaviour of learners. In this way learners should be made to know and understand that values are only realized when they are reflected in one's actions (Malobe and Salewski 1999) in Adeyemi et al (2003).

It is obvious that cultural values mediate the whole process of student involvement in decision-making. The South African policy allows student involvement in school governance while the Lesotho policy does not (refer to Act No.3 of 2010 on post primary school boards). However, even though the former allows students, the cultural values are still taken into account and are respected because there are demarcations restricting the extent to which students should be involved. The restrictions are stated as follows:

*"No learner member of a governing body may participate in any business of the governing body related to the following matters: (a) inefficiency, misconduct and grievance procedures or complaints relating to persons employed at the school; (b) misconduct procedures relating to learners at the school; (c) interviews of applications for posts at the school; (d) appointment of persons to posts at the school; (e) employment, promotion and discharge of persons in posts at the school."* (Gauteng School Education Regulation for Governing Bodies of Public School 1996:8).

Asmal (1999) further indicates the importance of nurturing of culture of communication and participation in schools that it means opening up channels of dialogue

between parents, educator and learners in such a way that moral respect develops between them and that each side treats the other with respect, realizing each has something to offer. The understanding derived from what Asmal delivers, is that culture of communication and participation will have the effect of enabling learners to become open, curious and empowered as future citizens.

When other countries are accepting changes and democratizing their education as is the case in South Africa, within the particular context of Lesotho, involvement of students in decision-making has to be negotiated with prevailing value systems which act to control students' behaviour when they happen to become members of school boards.

## CONCLUSION

Despite obvious importance and necessity of student involvement in decision-making of their school, the present policy of education in Lesotho does not allow such undertaking. Moreover, the reasons, advanced against student involvement truly, do not sound robust enough to deny them their right to contribute in decision-making that concerns the issues of the school in which they are stakeholders. The fact that students are young does not automatically mean that they are inept of making rightful and sound decisions. Students need to be guided and counselled in order that they can ultimately know how to choose well and reasonably. This being the case, this article concludes that students need to be included in decision-making processes undertaken in schools they attend, by being allowed to be members of the school boards in Lesotho as Total Quality Management advocates that all those who are stakeholders of an organization should be involved in decision-making.

The article further concludes that cultural values are highly regarded and respected by school communities in African context and particularly in Lesotho. They mediate both the process of school governance and students' behaviour. Possibly this is because in Lesotho parents are highly influential members of the school boards and in this regard it is clear that students need to be aware and respectful of these values. Considerably on the basis of change and democratic principles some of these values need to be revised, redefined and accordingly modified to suit requirements determined by life issues of the present like involvement of students in decision-making processes that concern some matters affecting their school. It is hoped that if cultural values are transformed meaningfully, they could facilitate democratic participation of students and eliminate the gap that seems to exist between the ways of doing certain practices in the past and in the contemporary transitional democracy in Lesotho. This further implies that when involved in decision-making processes, students should know their limits relative to the authority of adults.

However, observing the current situation on the ground, seemingly this issue of student involvement in decision-making will take some time before a change can be experienced in Lesotho High Schools' Governance. Up to now there are no outstanding signs of dissatisfaction from any stakeholders, including students themselves on this matter. The educational policy in relation to exclusion of students in school governance has not been openly challenged in Lesotho. It has not been part of the agenda or debate in Lesotho parliament. This could mean changing some sections of the Education Act No 3 of 2010 that so far has nothing on students' involvement in high school boards.

### Conflict of Interests

The author has not declared any conflict of interests.

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