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# Learner representatives in the governing bodies of secondary schools

## Summary

Learners in secondary schools are officially represented in school governing bodies (SGBs) in terms of the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996. As part of the democratisation process in South African society, decision-making power has been decentralised to the local level, where all role-players in the school and the community can contribute to its management. The important role of learners in the governing body must be seen against the background of learners' involvement since 1976 in the anti-government struggle to improve the conditions in black schools. Over the past few years, learners' contribution to positive school management has been limited. They are seen as representing their fellow learners, and the relationship between adults and learners in the governing body has created some problems. The fact that learners have been excluded from certain meetings or parts of meetings may have serious implications for the legal status of those meetings and for the decisions of the SGBs.

## Leerderverteenwoordigers op beheerliggame van sekondêre skole

Leeders is volgens die Suid-Afrikaanse Skolewet, Wet 84 van 1996, amptelik verteenwoordig in die beheerliggame van sekondêre skole. Dié insluiting is deel van die demokratiseringsproses van die Suid-Afrikaanse samelewing: die desentralisering van gesag en besluitneming in die onderwysstelsel sodat rolspelers die geleentheid kry om deel te neem aan die besluitnemingsprosesse op die laagste moontlike plaaslike vlakke. Hierdie stap moet gesien word teen die agtergrond van die rol wat leeders in swart skole gespeel het tydens die stryd vanaf 1976 teen die destydse regering en onderwysstelsel. In die afgelope paar jaar het leeders nog nie noemenswaardige bydraes tot die skole se bestuur gemaak nie. Leeders sien hulle rol meestal as verteenwoordiging van hulle mede-leeders. Die probleem is egter dat die volwassenes in die beheerliggame die leeders as te jonk en onkundig beskou om enige sinvolle, positiewe bydraes tot die skoolbestuur te maak. Die leeders word ook gereeld van die vergaderings of dele van die vergaderings van die skoolbeheerliggame verskoon.

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**L**earners are official members of school governing bodies (SGBs), in terms of section 24 of the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996 (Dept of Education 1996: 16). This is a new practice which is experiencing the problems to be expected in its initial stages. Some of the reasons why learners are now members of SGBs will be discussed in more detail but one of the important aims of the innovation is to give all role-players in schools a say in management and governance.

Although in terms of legislation there no longer are schools exclusively for white or black learners, the terms white and black schools will be used to refer to the previous situation, where schools were established for white or black (African, Coloured or Asian) learners only. Today there are still only a few white learners in schools which were previously exclusively black, while there are already a substantial number of black learners in previously whites-only schools, especially in rural areas.

The article focuses on the situation after 1976, when the struggle against the government and the education system began in the schools. The general cultural and political background in the white and black communities must be understood, as it affected the situation in schools and the role of learners on SGBs. In white schools a rather autocratic leadership style was generally present, but changed gradually to a more democratic and representative system of management and governance. In black schools, principals were seen as representatives of the government and the leadership style was, and still is fairly autocratic. This situation created problems for learners because they wanted to be involved in school management and governance, especially since they were part of the struggle against the education system.

In this article the concepts of management and governance will be used as clarified in section 16 of the South African Schools Act of 1996 (Dept of Education 1996: 12). Governance is the function of the SGB which includes the broad policies and control of school activities, while management is the function of the professional management in the school, namely the principal, deputy principal and heads of departments.

The main issue which this article seeks to address is whether learners can make a positive contribution to school governance and management. This should not be restricted to the democratic principles of representation of role-players. Their participation ought to conduce towards an improvement in teaching and learning as well as in the standard of education. The aim of schools should be to educate learners to an acceptable standard and to produce responsible adults who can contribute positively to their community.

In this article the background to learner representation in SGBs will be discussed as well as the results of research on learner representation on SGBs in white and black secondary schools.

## 1. Principles whereby learners are members of school governing bodies

The following may be regarded as some of the most important reasons for learners to participate in the governance of schools.

### 1.1 Democracy

Democratic principles became more important after the change in government in 1994. However, there is no uniformity in understanding the meaning and application of the concept of democracy. In general it implies that every person has the right to be involved in matters directly concerning him or her: for instance citizens can participate in the democratic elections of a country; parents can vote for members of the governing body. This vision already formed part of the struggle against the previous education system (Cobbett & Cohen 1988: 159). The presence of parents, learners and community members on SGBs may be seen as resulting from the struggle. In the past it was not possible for everybody to be involved in the democratic process in the country. There is now more emphasis on including all role-players in decision-making procedures at work and in residential areas. This democratic principle is consequently also put into practice in schools, where every role-player has to be part of governance. The most important role-players are official structures such as the department of education, the staff members, the parents, the learners, and community members and institutions. Everyone is as-

sured of being represented in decision-making procedures. Learners are supposed to be the main focus and the most important persons in schools and therefore are included.

## 1.2 Reward for learners

One of the first demands emanating in 1984 from COSAS (the Congress of South African Students) was that the government recognise SRCs (Student Representative Councils) and the popularly-drafted student constitutions. The SRCs represented learners and those at black schools were among the leading groups in the struggle against the education system (Cobbett & Cohen 1988: 156), hence playing an important role in changing the political and educational systems of the country. Learners were thus rewarded for their struggle against apartheid by being included on SGBs. Through the SRCs, learners controlled schools to a significant extent and they were thus granted representation in SGBs to acknowledge this role (Ngaso 1999: 80).

In this situation, the concepts of power and control are crucial. Under the previous government learners felt that they did not have any control over their situation, but were powerless. According to Furtwengler (1996: 36) people can be motivated if they feel that they have control over their own lives: power to make or influence the decisions that affect them. According to this view black learners could be motivated by including them in the decision-making structures of the school.

## 1.3 Learners' maturity

The majority of school learners in matric (the final year of school) are aged seventeen or eighteen. One of the aims of education is to educate learners to be well-balanced, skilled adults. Shortly after leaving school, they will have to make independent decisions regarding their income, residence, and partners in marriage, as well as to maintain successful relationships with those they live and work with. If such criteria are set for learners as young adults, they should also be able to participate in decision-making at school. Chinsamy (1995: 14-20) cites many authors indicating that the cognitive and moral development of learners in secondary schools is well advanced and that they are able to make sound decisions based on facts and on the morals and

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values of their communities. Outcomes-based education is designed for learners to acquire skills, and participation in school governance will enable them to learn management and other skills.

### 1.4 Decentralisation of decision-making

Management, governance and decision-making have been decentralised to local school governing structures instead of national or provincial education departments. One of the main reasons for decentralisation is that schools know their own needs and therefore can make the best decisions (Dept of Education 1996: 10; Brown 1990: 4-6; Murphy & Beck 1995: 59). Learners are important role-players and ought to be part of the decision-making process. They wish to articulate their feelings and concerns in a forum with the power to act. They also want to contribute towards decisions that may affect them. They do not want the teachers or parents to make such decisions for them (Chinsamy 1995: 55-6).

## 2. Background to learner participation in school governance

This concerns the period from 1976 to the 1994 elections and the adoption of the South African Schools Act, Act 84 of 1996.

Most white schools had a tradition of learners being part of the leaders' corps. The structures varied from school to school and from area to area, but most schools had some form of learner representation, and special attention was paid to the development of learner leadership (Du Plessis 1994: 45). Class leaders or prefects were elected by fellow learners or appointed by staff. There were also prefect or learner councils normally consisting of senior learners, and primarily representing learner participation in school governance. Other structures such as standard (grade) councils and representative learners' councils were also part of the learner representation structures at schools.

Although learner representatives were elected according to democratic principles, the extent to which learners were actually involved in the governance of schools is open to criticism on the grounds of the major role played by teachers and principals in the election of such representatives (prefects). The implication is that representa-

tives were not really elected by learners, but appointed by principals and teachers.

The principle of involving learners in the governance of schools may be challenged. Is it really the function of learners to govern a school? Can learners really contribute to improving the standard of teaching and learning? Research in white schools indicates that learners are not really interested, and do not have the time to participate in school governance (Heystek 1998 & 1999a: 11, 14).

Every school determined the duties and roles of its own learner representative structures. These included learner discipline, organising social activities, helping staff with various school activities and representing the learners. Representation could take the form of discussion with register teachers, the prefect tutor (member of staff) or any other member of staff. Representatives could also state the point of view of learners at meetings with other members of staff (Du Plessis 1994: 24-6).

The learner representative structures participated, to a greater or lesser extent, in the management and control of schools. School governing bodies and professional management (the principal and top management) were not under any obligation to consult learners or even to take their recommendations and advice into consideration.

The fact that learners did not have official recognition or representation was understandably criticised by representatives of the black communities and schools during the struggle against the previous government. Black learners played a leading role in schools during the struggle until 1994, while white learners played no role in the management of schools and did not attempt to change the government or the school system. White learners were not politically involved and consequently were not particularly interested in taking part in school governance. The representative learner structures fulfilled the needs of white learners.

The involvement of black learners in the management and governance of schools was in essence politically and economically motivated, rather than educational. The emergence and popularity of the Black Consciousness movement and the various student organisations provided the political and cultural background while the in-

crease in the number of black secondary learners, without related economic growth or employment opportunities were the main economic reasons for the involvement of black learners in the governance of schools. The relevant educational aspect was that the compulsory medium of instruction was Afrikaans, with limited mother-tongue teaching. Changes in the curriculum and structure of black education resulted in overcrowded secondary schools (Cobbett & Cohen 1988: 185). To this extent the involvement of black learners in the management and governance of schools was justified from their perspective. It is possible that white learners may in future also be politically and culturally motivated to become more involved in the governance and management of schools due to current changes.

Generally speaking, in previously black schools there were no prefects or official representative learner councils. Ngcobo (1988: 23) indicates that the majority of learners were not involved in school activities and did not have any influence on their own situation. Ngcobo presumes that learner involvement in school activities exerts a positive effect on discipline, teaching and learning.

Black communities regarded prefect structures as apartheid structures, as their perception was that prefects were appointed by the teachers (Ngcobo 1988: 22). This was why black learners did not want to recognise or accept the prefect system. Therefore other means of giving learners representation in the governance and management of schools had to be found. It was important that the new representation be given official recognition and be structured in such a way that school management had no choice about consulting representatives.

### 3. Project parameters

A research project was conducted to determine the role and influence of learner representatives in secondary SGBs. The pilot study included both black and white teachers and a questionnaire was finalised for distribution. The project was completed in two phases. In the first phase questionnaires were distributed to staff members of formerly blacks-only secondary schools in Mpumalanga, Gauteng and the Northern Province. Fifty of the seventy questionnaires distributed to respondents were returned. These provinces are representative

of all provinces in South Africa, from rural to urban. The respondents included members of SGBs as well as non-SGB members (Heystek 1997: 12).

The first phase also involved sending the same questionnaire to white learners attending a training course for learner representatives on SGBs. The aim was to determine the contribution of the learners to school governance and the problems they encounter as part of democratic school governance.

In the second phase questionnaires were sent to Afrikaans-speaking and dual-medium schools. This was done in conjunction with the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereniging (ATKV or Afrikaans Language and Culture Association).

These questionnaires were completed mainly by principals who were members of SGBs. Principals are able to evaluate the role that learners can play on a day-to-day basis. However, principals can be subjective since the role of learners can reflect negatively on the leadership of principals if they have not involved learners positively in school governance. It was clear from the research that principals are not always positive, especially about training learners for their task as representatives on SGBs (Heystek 1999a: 4). This could have influenced principals' answers to the questionnaire.

The aim of the questionnaire was to determine:

- whether learners were being trained for their new task as learner-representatives on SGBs;
- whether learners were making any positive contribution to the management and governance of schools, and
- what problems confront learners as members of SGBs.

The statistics in the tables below are derived from data from the ATKV questionnaires.

The percentages in Table 1 indicate the number of schools per province from which completed questionnaires were received. Although very few questionnaires from KwaZuluNatal and the Northern Province were returned, these schools are considered sufficiently representative for the results to be applicable to all schools involved in the random sample.



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Table 1: Schools per province

Province	%
Western Cape	25
Gauteng	24
Free State	12
Eastern Cape	11
Northern Cape	10
North West	6
Mpumalanga	6
Kwazulu Natal	3
Northern Province	2

## 4. Results

### 4.1 Training of learner representatives on SGBs

The majority of learner representatives on SGBs (60%) are not specifically trained for the task (Heystek 1999a: 5), for reasons to be discussed below. This is not an encouraging picture.

Table 2: Reasons for not training learners as SGB members

Reasons offered	%
No information available	33
It is not regarded as essential, seen as an extra expense because the learners' term of duty is short	16
Courses, eg ATKV course, too expensive	13
Not enough time in the fourth quarter for a leadership course; examinations start earlier each year	12
Own training at school	12
Other scholastic activities at the same time as leadership training	6
Long distances	4
Full programme for learners	4

The percentages indicate the relative importance of reasons. 33%, for example, means that 33% of respondents indicated this as the most important reason why learners received no training.

The most important reason was the lack of information about courses. This could mean that there are no such courses on the market, that such information does not reach schools, or that principals

do not convey such information because they think it is not worth training the learners. This could reflect a negative attitude among principals towards the participation of learners in SGB activities. If schools are not aware of courses, they are unable to budget for them and no funding will be available.

The fact that training is not regarded as essential correlates with the general perspective of respondents on leadership training, which may indicate a negative attitude (Heystek 1999a: 7). The short period in which learners are members of the SGB does influence the decision to make funds available for training.

The shortage of funds for such courses may be a result of the financial burdens that schools already have to bear. When they have to curtail their spending, schools tend to cut funds for training first of all. If leadership training is not afforded priority, schools will not be willing to allocate large sums for it.

The training of learners should not be seen as a single event aimed at the year in which learners are members of SGBs. Training should be given to learner leaders in all grades over a number of years to enable them to grow in the democratic process of participatory decision-making. With such a training model, learners may make a more valuable future contribution to the SGB.

If white schools have problems sourcing funds for learner training it can be expected that the black schools will have greater problems. Black schools generally have less funds available since black communities are on average poorer than white communities.

Factors like the learners' full programme or other school activities or that the fourth term is not suitable for training learner leaders are acceptable reasons because schools and learner leaders are normally very busy. School managers (principals) must determine priorities for schools. If leadership training becomes a priority, school managers can and will be in a position to make time for learner leaders to be trained for their important task as representatives on the SGB.

It is indeed possible to conclude that there is a need for learner representatives on sSGBs to be trained (60% of learners were not trained). Organisations providing the training must make sure that schools

Heystek/Learner representatives in school governing bodies receive the relevant information in time to budget and also to assist the principals to make it a priority for the school.

## 4.2 Advantages of learner representation on SGBs for school management

According to Table 3 it is not clear whether learners actually make a positive difference to the effectiveness of school governance. The indications are that learners do not really make a positive or creative contribution to meetings. Although they sometimes make suggestions which could influence decisions, the adults involved do not generally esteem such suggestions highly.

Table 3: Advantages of learner representation on SGBs for school management

Advantages	%
Learners are represented	21
Link between learners and SGB	16
Occasional contributions that can influence decisions	15
Improvement and maintenance of discipline and aid to new learners	12
Representatives, organising functions in the interest of learners	11
Opinion of learners given regarding various subjects	7
Adults made aware of learner thinking, especially concerning matters of policy	6
Gain experience regarding school management	5
Learners serve on committees and have the right to vote	3
Expediting of feedback to learners	3
Solving problems between learners and educators	1

In most of the white schools where the research was done, the parents and principals were sufficiently skilled to govern and manage the school effectively. Learners cannot always be expected to have radical new ideas or contribute greatly to effective school governance. There was no indication that learners had offered positive new ideas to improve school governance or teaching. Another possibility, according to the information in Tables 5 and 7, is that learners have learnt that their ideas are not taken seriously, and are thus unwilling to suggest anything new. Learners are easily and frequently excluded from meetings, which and gives them the idea that their contributions are seen less valuable.

The South African Schools Act does not permit learner input in teaching or the curriculum although they are members of SGBs. Curriculum and teaching matters are exclusively the domain of teachers. An example of learner participation and influence in schools was identified during a visit to schools in Norway, namely Bjorgvin Secondary School and Natland Intermediary School. Although learners in Norway do not have any representation in any school governing structures, they can influence curriculum and learning matters. Learners of all grades took part in compulsory discussions with teachers, aimed at developing and evaluating the schools. All aspects of the school, from interpersonal relationships among learners and teachers to methodology and the curriculum were addressed. In secondary schools, in particular, teachers should take note of the opinions of learners regarding teaching and learning. The Norwegian teachers responded to the learners' recommendations, although teachers still had the final say in the teaching and learning situation and learners' recommendations had to be confined to the existing curriculum. The voice Norwegian learners have is directly related to the fact that children are legally regarded as adults at the age of eighteen. Parents have virtually no legal say or powers regarding school management and control. There is no official learner representation as part of the governance structure of the schools (Heystek 1999c). This is an indication that it is not necessary to participate in official structures to influence a situation. The most important factor is that the input of role players must be taken seriously and must be implemented if it is a valid contribution.

#### 4.3 Workshop: learners as members of SGBs

At a workshop on the role of learner representatives in SGBs, principals of both black and white schools were sceptical about any real positive results emanating from the participation of learners in SGB meetings (Heystek 1999b). The presenters at the workshop were the following:

- the chairperson of the Federation of South African School Governing Bodies (Fedsa)
- the principal of a multiracial secondary school

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- the principal of a black secondary school in a township
- a matric learner and learner representative on the SGB of a multi-racial school.

The Fedsa chairperson was of the opinion that learners do not have the necessary knowledge and skills to make a meaningful contribution to school governance. This indicates the negative attitude of some adult SGB members towards the contribution that learners can make. The problem with other structures, such as the prefect system or the student representative body, is that principals, SGBs or management teams will not consult learners or take their opinion into consideration if they are legally bound to do so. Although the aim is to include learners as important role-players in the decision-making process of the school, the learners' lack of time, knowledge and skills does not enable them to make a substantial contribution. The choice may be between compulsory representation with no real evidence of successful contributions and voluntary representation and participation according to the needs of every school.

According to the black school principal, a factor at black schools which hampers the representation of learners on SGBs is that black learners still want to use alternative structures to achieve their aims. These are structures like student representative councils and other politically orientated organisations. The principals and the state want learners to use the SGB, which has been instituted as a forum for airing their grievances, but also as a means of contributing to positive development in schools.

The Fedsa chairperson and the principal of the black school emphasised that learners from grade 8 upwards must be included in the governing structures of schools. Learners will receive more training and experience and will be better equipped to contribute positively towards school governance. If learners experience the adults on the SGB as positive towards them, and really looking after their interests, they do not feel obliged to attend all meetings. They do not think that the adults want to hide anything from them and they therefore trust them. When learners feel that they can trust adults with the management and governance of the school, or when they feel they have control over their own situation, they are motivated to continue with their school work.

The fact that learners are in a position to convey their opinion to the SGB can thus definitely have positive results.

#### 4.4 Problems experienced with learner representatives on SGBs

The percentages in Table 4 indicate the value of the factor in relation to the other stated factors (not percentages of the total population). The most important problem is that respondents regard learners as too young to contribute to school governance in a meaningful way. The first two responses indicate that most school governing bodies include learner members only because the law requires it and not because they think that learners can make a meaningful contribution. If learners were trained over several years to take part in the financial activities of the school, for example, they would indeed be able to contribute to the activities of the SGB. If principals saw learners in a different light, as mature and soon-to-be independent, their contributions might elicit respect, which might be conducive to more meaningful contributions.

Table 4: Problems experienced with learner representatives on SGBs

Problems	%
Too young	25
Insufficient knowledge to make a contribution concerning matters, especially finances	23
Trust concerning discussions at the meetings is not as desired, especially concerning sensitive issues	16
Seldom make any comments or ask questions, no active participation	13
They are inhibited by the adults	9
They are not interested in the daily management of the school	6
Owing to full academic and sport programmes they can seldom attend meetings	5
They raise problems that can be addressed in other places	4
They talk about school matters that do not directly concern learners	4
Learners want to take over	4
Late night meetings are problematic at times, especially during tests and examinations	3
Term of duty is very short	3
Transport problems	1

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Section 32 of the South African Schools Act of 1996 indicates that the age of most learners excludes them from legally entering into contracts as part of the SGB, or taking part in decisions which have contractual obligations (Dept of Education 1996: 23). However, this does not mean that they have to be excluded from discussions on these matters.

Regulations exclude learners from activities such as the appointment of staff (Gauteng Dept of Education 1999). It is understandable that they cannot be involved in official decisions on appointments because contracts are involved. But learners who are in contact with teachers on a daily basis might well be able to contribute meaningfully to discussions concerning appointments. It is possible for learners to exercise better judgement than parents or other parties.

The second problem is closely linked to the first. The youth, lack of knowledge and insufficient skills of learners are the cause of their inability to make a meaningful contribution on SGBs. It is acceptable that, together with the extra time demanded of learners, this will make it difficult for them to contribute significantly. But principals and SGBs should not underestimate the contributions of learners especially if they are given the opportunity to develop their skills and their level of maturity.

These two major reasons cast doubt on learners' potentially positive contribution to and participation in the activities of SGBs. Is it actually worthwhile to legally force schools to make learners part of control and governance? The majority of learners are not in white schools, and there are other problems relating to the management of some schools and the culture of learning and teaching, to which learners can contribute in a significant way. The trust that learners have in the management and governance of schools (parents, principal, teachers and the state) is important and determines whether learners will participate or not, as well as their method of participation. These matters will be dealt with in more detail below.

Learners do not actively take part in discussions, due to the two above-mentioned factors, and because adults tend to dominate them, in accordance with their view of children, which varies from community to community. In Norwegian society children are regarded as

adults at a younger age (officially eighteen years) and this influences the role they play in schools (Heystek 1999). The adage that children should be seen and not heard reflects the attitude of most adults on SGBs in South African society.

The brevity of the term of duty of learners has been mentioned as having a limiting effect on their influence. A possible solution would be to elect one learner representative from Grade 11 in order to ensure continuity.

That learners sometimes tend to take over or do not want to cooperate is a negative tendency that should be dealt with during training. Youthful rebellious presumption or enthusiasm can, nevertheless, be utilised to the benefit of the school, if learners are given specific projects.

#### 4.5 Comments or recommendations regarding learner representatives on SGBs

The first six comments in Table 5 emphasise the positive contribution that learners can make to the governance and management of schools. This indicates that there are many positive considerations regarding the involvement of learners and that not everything that learners do should be regarded in a negative light.

A few factors that do call for attention are the negative criticism of learners and the fact that they are inclined to take over, as indicated in Table 4.

The possible positive contribution of learners was emphasised by the matriculant attending the workshop (Heystek 1999b). She indicated that there are learners who have the time and the inclination to make positive contributions to school governance if the opportunity presents itself. Their main contribution derives from the fact that they are in the classroom every day and spend most of their time in contact with teachers and fellow learners. This gives them an insight into both problems and opportunities at that level. The SGB must inform learners about problems in school management and governance, and ask them to suggest improvements. According to Ngaso (1999: 72) the contribution of learners can be rendered more effective if:



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Table 5: Recommendations regarding learner representatives on SGBs

Recommendations	%
The learner representatives on the SGB's have to play a bigger role in serving the interests of the learners	14
It is good opportunity for the learners' self development	11
Representatives are well prepared for those parts for which they are responsible	11
Learner representatives are underestimated at times	11
Need to have more insight into the policy of the school	8
There is a great need for better training so that learner leaders will be better equipped for their task	8
Need only be present when issues are discussed pertaining to learners	8
The term of duty is too short, even if they are trained (content of the course, eg Educational Law not really applicable because term of duty is too short)	6
The training for SGB representatives will in future be part of the SRC training as everybody has to know eventually what the duties of the SGB are	6
Members of the SGB have not yet accepted the culture change	5
Learners find adults too intimidating	3
It is difficult to train new people every year	3
Learners can criticise the Department and policy freely while their principals cannot do it because they are committed to the state	3
The ATKV course is too expensive albeit good	3

- the process of participative decision-making is legitimate to ensure the co-operation of all role-players,
- there is transparency in schools and governing structures, and
- learners are empowered.

SGB and school management members who have not yet accepted the culture of change in management and governance of schools may be sceptical towards the contribution of learners. All members of SGBs will have to learn how to use participatory decision-making and democratic processes to the advantage of the school. The adult domination of learners is unacceptable and a change in attitude is required.

#### 4.6 Participation of learners in SGB meetings

Table 6 indicates whether learners are excluded from meetings, or parts thereof. It is alarming to note that learners are excluded from more than half of all meetings (53%). According to section 32 of the South African Schools Act, learners should not be excluded from SGB meetings. Although there are restrictions on their participation in contractual matters, this does not mean that they should be excluded, wholly or partially, from meetings. The Gauteng Department of Education excluded learners from meetings concerning the appointment of teachers in Circular letter 5/99. SGBs should be aware that excluding learners from meetings may be illegal.

Table 6: Exclusion of learners from SGB meetings

Exclusion	%
Yes	53
No	47

Learners are only allowed to participate in events that affect them directly. It seems as if adults on the SGBs (the chairpersons or principals who completed the questionnaires) determine which issues concern learners. This may limit the influence that learners can have on school governance (Heystek 1999a: 14).

The exclusion of learners may be a practical arrangement aimed at not detaining them at meetings for too long. Learners are at school to learn and not to govern; therefore it may be correct that their involvement in meetings should be as brief as possible. But there must be a clear policy about when and why learners should attend. If learners report a problem they must at least be involved in its discussion. If such discussion precedes disciplinary action or activities with legal or contractual implications, learners may be excused because they can not vote on the issue.

In discussions with learners during the ATKV courses it became clear that they were not aware that they were not allowed to be excluded from meetings (Heystek 1998). It is important for learners to be informed of their rights and of the fact that they can be asked to leave meetings, but may not be excluded without valid reason.

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Table 7: Reasons for excluding learners from SGB meetings

Reasons	%
Staff matters, eg appointments	47
Financial position of parents or general financial matters	28
Private problems of staff	27
Sensitive matters	26
Discussing members of staff	25
Own request when it becomes too late or there is too little learner business (only 10 minutes) to discuss	13
Matters that do not pertain directly to learners	11
Academic business of learners	9
When the meeting runs too late and learners want to study	8
Upgrading the grounds	6

The percentages indicate the relative importance of the various factors in relation to the other factors mentioned in the table. The learners' lack of skills and knowledge of the matters mentioned may be a reason for exclusion from meetings. The most important reason for exclusion is undoubtedly that learners may under no circumstances be involved in contracts and agreements with financial implications. Learners may not vote on contractual issues but this does not necessarily mean that they must be excluded from the discussion thereof.

It is important that learners should have the opportunity to report problems concerning teachers and be present for at least part of the discussion. In any case learners should receive feedback. It must be borne in mind that black learners were accustomed to being involved in curricular activities and matters related to teachers' misconduct and activities which might have a detrimental effect on teaching and learning (Cobbett & Cohen 1988: 192).

One reason for the "learner" unrest of the 1970s was that they did not have any influence or representation in the governance of schools, and hence on their own situation (Cobbett & Cohen 1988: 184). The SGBs provide a structure for such representation. The adults must be sure to use it for the benefit of learners, the school and the community. They must not exclude learners just because they think they cannot make a contribution. Learners must learn to use the official structure to their own and the school's benefit. This is particularly

important in schools whose learners come from different cultural backgrounds.

It must be borne in mind that it is difficult to motivate people to participate if they are used only when it suits the majority (the adults). Learners being allowed to attend meetings only on matters pertaining to them can impact negatively on their participation. If principals or chairpersons of SGBs determine when and how learners may participate, learners may feel that they are actually not important, and consequently not take much trouble to contribute positively. The reason learners excuse themselves from meetings may well be that the adults have intimated that the rest of the issues do not really concern them.

An important factor determining the involvement of learners in SGBs is the trust they have in the managers and governors of the school. During the workshop it was specifically pointed out that even in black schools learners find it easier to excuse themselves from meetings when they trust the adults. When learners believe that the adults manage the school to the benefit of all and do not consciously or subconsciously give anybody an unfair advantage, it will not be so crucial to learners to take part in meetings. This mutual trust has to be cultivated and demonstrated in practice (Heystek 1999b).

It is not clear what specific academic issues tend to lead to learners' exclusion from meetings. If it is because of problems with individuals the exclusion is acceptable up to a point. However, academic matters are of the utmost importance to learners and there needs to be a good reason for excluding them from such discussions.

## 5. Conclusion

The inclusion of learners as representatives on the SGBs of secondary schools was probably implemented in response to a very specific need and pressure in black schools to give learners official representation in governance and management. Learners' representation on SGBs is intended to improve teaching and learning in schools. Furtwengler (1996: 38) indicates that learners can make a difference in schools although they are not part of the official governing structure. Learner representation must be genuine, with enough control and power to

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make learners feel that they really can make a difference and influence their own situation.

Schools in traditionally Afrikaans-speaking communities should use the SGB structure to their own benefit and that of the community. Learners can make a contribution if they are given the opportunity. Learners and adults on SGBs have to develop into a democratic participatory decision-making system. Schools have to use learners according to their own culture and needs, but also have to see to it that the legal requirements concerning SGBs are met. If SGBs neglect to elect learners according to the legal stipulations or to let them take part in meetings, unnecessary problems for the schools and school governing bodies may result.

Learners in black schools may use the school governing body to improve effective teaching and learning and refrain from joining other organisations with non-educational aims.

Although learner representatives on SGBs do not function effectively at this stage, everybody must contribute and put more effort into the process in order to improve the effectiveness of the structure. It is an important learning opportunity in which learners can use democratic and consultative methods to solve problems and improve their situation.

Learners still do not make a meaningful contribution to the governance of schools. The reasons for this are as follows:

- Learners do not have sufficient skills or knowledge concerning matters discussed by the SGB.
- Adults dominate learners.
- The input of learners is not always duly appreciated.
- Learners are excluded from parts of meetings.
- Participation demands time of the learners. Their time is limited owing to very busy school programmes as well as their own programmes.
- The term of duty of learners is very short, and does not give them the opportunity to grasp what is expected of them.

Both adults and learners need to change their attitude to derive benefit from having learners on the SGB. The success and quality of

learners' participation in the management of schools will be determined mainly by the attitude of the local school towards learners, within the constraints of the school's specific circumstances. Trained leaders should be able to make a better contribution to improving both school governance and management and making teaching and learning more effective.

## 6. Recommendations

The following recommendations may assist in improving the contribution of learner representatives on governing bodies in schools:

- Give learners responsibility for certain tasks or projects. Train them for those tasks and projects.
- Make learners members of certain committees from grade eight upwards, so that they can gain experience.
- Make use of examples where learners have made a difference in the management of schools to emphasise the importance of learners and their training.
- Teach learners to implement structures for reporting problems. Be sure to give feedback on issues discussed in meetings.
- Help learners to concentrate on academic matters when they report problems to the SGB.
- The aim of learner participation in SGB activities is to make them jointly responsible for their teaching and learning so that they will also see the school as their property and thus take care of it.
- The elected learner representatives have to be capable of making a significant contribution to the SGB. Principals should be encouraged to explain to the school what is required of such learners before the election takes place. Learner representatives should have the time and motivation to participate fully.
- Research is still needed to determine whether the contributions that learners make are realised and to what extent principals actually experience the contribution of the learners as positive.

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