Learners as Leaders in Namibian Schools: Taking Responsibility and Exercising Agency

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ABSTRACT

Educational leadership and management (ELM) research has, all-too-often, attributed a positional quality to leadership and equated school leadership with the principal at the top of the management hierarchy. We argue that leadership is not limited by formal authority and can be exercised by individuals and groups other than the principal. Of specific interest to us is the leadership of learners. However, research in this niche area is limited, and particularly so in African countries such as Namibia. Framed by the concepts of *learner voice* and *democratic citizenship*, this article focuses on the leadership development of Namibian school learners and argues that learners should be treated as people whose ideas matter. It draws on a Bachelor of Education Honours ELM elective which required Honours students (practicing teachers) to establish leadership clubs in their schools and involve learners in a change initiative in pursuit of leadership development. The research which informed this article was designed as a case study to explore learner voice and the development of leadership across extra-curricular leadership clubs in 32 Namibian schools. Data were generated from a number of different sources and analysed thematically.

The purpose of this article is two-fold; first to give a broad overview of the 32 Namibian clubs and show, through the identification of the focus areas of their club projects for the year, 'what mattered' to learners, and second to discuss, in detail, one of these 32 clubs. On the basis of our findings, we argue that learners can indeed be developed as leaders through the introduction of learner leadership clubs in schools. Given the appropriate forum, learners are able to articulate what matters to them in schools; they are able to develop a voice. Given the right conditions and concomitant support, learners can enact leadership, particularly when they have conceptualised the school change initiative. Because learners are central to school life, they are well placed to bring about school change. Yet, we caution, the leadership development of learners is unlikely to be sustained without bold and continued leadership on the part of teachers and the school management team.

1. INTRODUCTION

There is a vast literature on educational leadership but much of it focuses on the person of the leader and attempts to identify the traits and attributes this person is endowed with. Gronn (2002) describes how the concept of leadership was originally understood as 'focused leadership' with the attention on the stand-alone leader, the solo leader. In tandem with this traditional view, the literature has attributed a positional quality to leadership and so leadership has, all too often, been equated with the principal at the top of the management hierarchy.

In direct contrast, there are those who argue that to conflate leadership with principalship is to limit the power of the concept. In working with these concepts as distinctive entities, Christie (2010) explains that while the concepts of management and principalship are organisational concepts, leadership is not. Therefore, because it is not limited by formal authority, leadership is infinite and, like energy, it can reside outside or inside an organisation (Grant, 2014). Defined as a process which brings about change in an organisation (as opposed to management which holds the organisation steady) (Christie, 2010; Grant, 2014), leadership has a moral purpose and requires of one the courage to challenge the conventions and rules in pursuit of a socially just and democratic society (Smyth, 2006b; Starratt, 2007). Understood in this way, leadership is powerful and situated in its social, historical and cultural context (Watkins, 1989; Spillane, Halverson and Diamond, 2004). It is relational and dialectic and engages the human agency of all members of an organisation (Angus, 2006).

From this premise then, and aligning ourselves with Lingard, Hayes, Mills and Christie, we assert that the notion of principal as the only source of educational leadership should be disrupted because "this masks and diminishes other ways in which leadership is exercised in schools" (2003, p. 141). Like these scholars, we believe that leadership can be exercised by individuals and groups other than the principal. Of specific interest to us is the leadership of learners. However, research in this niche area is limited, and particularly so in African countries such as Namibia (Whitehead, 2009; Grant, 2015).

The four major goals of Namibia post-independence, outlined in the policy document entitled *Toward education for all* (Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992), are access, equity, quality and democracy. While this policy document defines learning as 'an active process' which requires participation from learners in 'developing, organising, implementing and managing their learning' (Namibia Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992), it is relatively silent on issues of leading, particularly in relation to learners. And, while Namibia's *Education and Training Sector Improvement Programme* (Namibia, 2007) does refer to leadership, this is largely in relation to capacity development of Ministry of Education officials. The document is largely silent on leadership development as it pertains to teachers and learners.

Against this backdrop, the purpose of this article is to share some of the findings of our Namibian research on how leadership can be developed in learners, and, in so doing, contribute to the knowledge base on learner leadership in the African context. We begin the article with a brief discussion of literature which speaks to the importance of developing leadership in learners; particularly for the purpose of instilling in learners the principles and values of democratic citizenship. The Bachelor of Education Honours (B. Ed. Honours) service learning initiative at Rhodes University is then introduced. This Educational Leadership and Management (ELM) elective seeks to develop learner voice and leadership in schools through learner involvement in extra-curricular leadership clubs. Reference is then made to the large longitudinal research project exploring learner leadership because it provides the setting for the Namibian case study, the focus of this article. The Namibian case study is then discussed and the findings presented. We now turn to the literature to argue that, in the pursuit of democratic citizenship, it is crucial that learners are developed as leaders in schools.

2.   LEARNERS AS LEADERS: TOWARDS DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP

Within the emergent field of school leadership, children are a virtual absence (Gunter and Thomson, 2007). While learners are a majority group making up membership of school organisations (Woods, 2012), all-too-often we denigrate their participation in decision-making and do not value them as knowledgeable, intuitive and discerning members of the school community. Consequently, we speak too readily on their behalf and often misunderstand or disregard their perspectives (Fielding, 2001; Grant, 2015). The pervasive ethos of performativity and testing which permeates our present day schools, both locally and globally, does little to alleviate this problem.

However, in a society like Namibia which is committed to democracy, a core purpose of education must be to instill in learners the principles and values of democratic citizenship (Noddings, 2005; Smyth, 2006b). As Angus explains, the moral purpose of education and educational leadership must be: "to promote in schools, as social institutions the core values of social justice, democracy, and equity" (2006, p. 374). Indeed, a democratic society requires citizens who are willing to participate, competent enough to think critically, able to distinguish between right and wrong, make wise civic choices and have a social conscience (Noddings, 2005). This requires that schools become less concerned with standards, high stakes testing and accountability (Smyth, 2006a; Grant, 2015) and more concerned with developing learners as fully functioning human beings capable of participating, contributing and finding fulfilment in the countless aspects of democratic public life (Starratt, 2007). This is because, as Luff and Webster argue, "democracy is a way of life that is essential for the well-being and growth of individuals and societies" (2014, p. 139).

Thus the question we have to pose is how to encourage forms of leadership that listen

to and heed the voices of "the most informed, yet marginalised witnesses of schooling, young people" (Smyth, 2006a, p. 279). How do we invoke learner voice and develop their agency as leaders? Here we use 'learner voice' to describe the range of ways in which learners can share in decision-making in schools (Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009) as we strive towards true democracy within institutions (Shuttle, 2007).

One such way to invoke learner voice and develop agency is to expand opportunities for learners to work in participatory ways with their peers on issues that are of concern to them. This can happen both inside and outside of the formal curriculum and is, as Angus (2006) contends, our moral responsibility as leaders and teachers. It requires that we think beyond the constraints of the formal curriculum and generate safe and creative spaces in which to listen authentically to the stories, experiences and interests of learners, endeavour to understand their position and then support their development as engaged and thoughtful citizens in co-constructed, collaborative ways (Angus, 2006; Fielding, 2006; Busher, 2012).

Before moving on to sketch one such participatory endeavour we first wish to clarify how we will be using the terms 'student' and 'learner' in this article. We use 'learner' to refer to school-going youth and 'student' to refer to people registered for study in higher education institutions, in this instance part-time students (practicing teachers) registered for a B. Ed. Honours degree at Rhodes University. Following this logic, we use the term 'learner voice' in this article which is in contrast to the international literature which refers to the voices of learners as 'student voice' (Fielding, 2001; Mitra & Gross, 2009).

3. DEVELOPING LEADERSHIP CLUBS; DEVELOPING LEARNER VOICE

3.1 The B. Ed. Honours service learning initiative

In an effort to foreground learner voice and develop the leadership of learners, the ELM elective of the Rhodes University B. Ed. Honours degree was redesigned with a learner leadership focus. In addition, it was reconceptualised as a service learning initiative, i.e. a teaching and learning strategy which linked the academic learning of the Honours students with a community service experience (Council on Higher Education, 2006; Hart, 2006). The elective required that the Honours students lead an organised service activity (the establishment of learner leadership clubs) in their schools and reflect on the process in such a way as to gain "further understanding of course content, a broader appreciation of the discipline, and an enhanced sense of civic responsibility" (Bringle and Hatcher, 1996, p. 222).

Thus, the Honours' students were mandated to establish learner leadership clubs as an

extra-curricular activity for a selected group of learners in their schools. The purpose of the clubs was that of leadership development which, as Whitehead explains, requires "a multifaceted approach, which includes techniques that range from formal academic processes to experiential development, or what is described as leadership development within the context of work" (2009, p. 856). In the schooling context, the clubs provided learners with opportunities to develop their voice in a space in which they would 'be heard', develop their leadership and "learn how to become citizens prepared to actively engage in their communities and participate in democracy" (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 522). Important to note is that these clubs should not be confused with the legislated 'Learners' Representative Council' (LRC) structure in secondary schools as outlined in part III of the *Namibian Education Act* (Namibian Ministry of Basic Education, Sports and Culture, 2001). The clubs represented an additional learner leadership structure and were purposely established as an extra-curricular activity so that they did not interfere with the roles and responsibilities of the LRC members in the formal leadership structure.

3.2 The longitudinal research project: the setting for the Namibian case study

The research which underpins this article is part of a larger research project exploring learner leadership. Designed as a longitudinal study, the project tracks the B. Ed. Honours ELM elective at Rhodes University over a four year period (2013 – 2016). Framed as a constructivist study and adopting a qualitative, multi-case study approach, the project seeks to answer the following research question: Do learner leadership clubs (as an extra-curricular activity) contribute to the development of leadership amongst learners in schools and, if so, how? By means of four case studies, the project seeks to determine: i) 'What matters' to learners in schools across South Africa and Namibia, ii) Whether learners can plan and implement school change initiatives in their schools and, if so, how, iii) What challenges are experienced when implementing these school change initiatives, and iv) whether leadership in the pursuit of democratic citizenship is developed in these learners.

3.3 The Namibian case study

The 2014 case study informs this article. In this case study, 32 Namibian students registered for the Rhodes University B. Ed. Honours ELM elective were involved in the design and implementation of learner leadership clubs in their schools during the 2014 academic year. The majority of these clubs (29) were located in Namibian high schools with only three clubs in primary schools. Informed by the work of Mitra and Gross (2009) and their 'pyramid of student voice', the foremost responsibility of these 32 Namibian Honours students was to 'listen authentically' and 'hear' learners through the mechanism of the clubs in order to learn about their experiences at school and what mattered to them. This was achieved by getting the learners in the club involved as co-

researchers in the design of a simple closed questionnaire (see Grant, 2015 for more detail) which was distributed to and completed by learners in their grade. Each Honours student then assisted the members of the club in the analysis of the data and together the top five common areas that 'mattered to learners' were determined. From this list, the Honours student guided the learners in selecting a doable and interesting priority area (Grant, 2015) which would become the focus of the club for the remainder of the year.

Thereafter, the Honours student in collaboration with the club members planned a school change initiative to address the focus area identified and the learners then implemented the plan in their school over the remainder of the year. Important to note is that the role of the Honours student (the school teacher) was to create an authentic and collaborative space (the extra-curricular club) in which club decisions were shaped, driven and implemented by learners, thus developing their leadership.

The Namibian case study relied on two channels of data; data sourced from the assessment tasks completed by the Honours students and additional data sourced by the student in interaction with learners during club meetings and activities. The Honours assessment tasks included reflective assignments on the change initiative, the research reports (submitted as the exam equivalent) and student self-reflective journals (the DP requirement for the elective). Additional data was sourced from the initial learner questionnaires, student observations of club meetings and activities as well as focus group interviews with learners. Thematic content analysis was used to analyse the data.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Before attempting an answer to our main research question, we first respond to each of the four sub-questions. We begin with a response to the sub-question which explored 'what mattered' to learners in Namibian schools. We start with a broad overview of the Namibian case where the focus areas of each of the 32 learner leadership clubs are identified and arranged into four semi-distinct categories. These focus areas are important as they represent 'what mattered' to Namibian school learners.

Thereafter, we hone in on one of the learner leadership clubs and use this club as a vignette to show how the club was established, 'what mattered' to this particular group of learners, how they planned and implemented a change initiative in their school, what challenges they faced along the way and how their leadership was developed. In so doing, we provide answers to each of the four sub-questions which guided our study. We move now to the broad overview.

4.1 'What mattered' to Namibian school learners?

The 32 Namibian learner leadership clubs were variously established and membership differed from club to club. The focus areas of the change initiatives determined by the club members were also interesting in their diversity. These focus areas are captured in the middle column of Table 1 and the number of clubs with that particular focus area is noted in the column to the right. These focus areas are then grouped into four broad categories and are represented in the left column.

Table 1: 'What mattered' to Namibian learners?
Categories and focus areas of the learner leadership clubs

CATEGORY	FOCUS AREAS OF THE LEARNER LEADERSHIP CLUBS	NO OF CLUBS [N = 32]
ENGLISH PROFICIENCY (Total 16)	Speaking, reading and writing English	8
	Library access and functionality	4
	Academic performance (including homework club, learning skills)	4
LEARNER CONDUCT (Total 10)	Drug & substance abuse intervention programme	2
	Bullying	2
	Late coming & absenteeism	2
	Ill-discipline	2
	Uniform	1
	Learner pregnancy	1
PHYSICAL ENVIRONMENT (Total 3)	Littering campaign	2
	Tree planting	1
EXTRA-CURRICULAR (Total 3)	Introducing an extra-mural sporting activity	2
	Improving the LRC election campaign	1

Sourced with slight adaptation from Grant, 2015, p. 103

From the table and drawing liberally on Grant (2015), it can be seen that half of the learner leadership clubs (16 of 32) in the Namibian case study had focus areas in the English proficiency category. Eight of these sixteen clubs initiated projects which involved the writing, reading and speaking of English. In this category, library access and functionality was a focus area of another four clubs while academic performance was a central focus for the remaining four clubs in this category.

Learner conduct was the next most common category (ten of 32 clubs) with learner change initiatives which addressed drug and substance abuse, bullying, late coming and absenteeism, ill-discipline, appropriate wearing of the school uniform and learner

pregnancy (Table 1). The third group of clubs was categorised as those having an interest in the physical environment of the school. Of this group, one club was involved in a tree planting project and another two initiated littering campaigns. The fourth category, extra-curricular initiatives, included a LRC focus as well as the introduction of an extra-mural sporting activity.

While this analysis is useful in sketching the breadth of the case study, it falls short in terms of detailed descriptions of the clubs and how they functioned. Thus the purpose of the remaining pages of this article is to provide a comprehensive account of one learner leadership club to show how the club was established, 'what mattered' to this particular group of learners, how they planned and implemented their school change initiative, what challenges they faced along the way and how their leadership was developed. We purposely selected a club from the English proficiency category, the most common category discussed in Table 1, as our vignette.

1.2 The vignette

(a) The school

The school is a government secondary school situated in a rural setting in the Ohangwena Region, northern Namibia. The school was founded in the 1970s and originally offered Standards 6 to 10 with a teaching staff of eight. Today, the school has a teaching staff of 27 members and it offers grades 8 to 12 to approximately 750 learners. The school is managed by the principal and three Heads of Department; one for Languages, one for Social Science and one for Mathematics and Science. Fourteen learners from Grades 11 and 12 constitute the school's LRC. The school operates as a cluster centre for the region.

The school has sufficient classrooms for the teaching of its 750 learners. It has a library, a computer laboratory, a hall, an administration block which comprises offices and a staff room, and it also has a tuck shop. It has a soccer field, a volleyball court, a dilapidated basketball court and a newly built netball court. The school offers boarding facilities to around 500 of its learners and the boarding establishment is maintained by 28 support staff; including six matrons, two secretaries as well as a number of cleaners and cooks. Of the teaching staff, 95% are housed on the school premises.

(b) Establishment and membership of the learner leadership club

The Honours student (a teacher in the school described above) first obtained permission from his principal to establish the learner leadership club and do his research. Thereafter, he determined his entry requirements for membership of the club: first, learners who had been at the school for a minimum of three years were eligible (which would have afforded them time to gain a sound knowledge of the affairs of the school) and second, learners from grades which were assessed externally via a national examination were excluded. Thus club membership was restricted to Grade 11

learners (reflective assignment 2). However, the Honours student soon found that not all Grade 11 learners wanted to become involved; some were not interested while others were shy or suffered from a low self-esteem. Others were less intimidated by the new initiative and keen to be involved but, when they heard that they had to meet regularly, some excused themselves because of clashes with their other extra-curricular activities (reflective assignment 2). Thus, at the end of a gradual self-elimination process, the club had a permanent membership of 10 learners; five female and five male (research report).

(c) Learners as researchers: 'What mattered' to the learners in this school?

Once the club was established, meetings were held every second Thursday after school hours. It was during this time that the club members were introduced by the Honours student to the process of research and involved as co-researchers (after Fielding, 2001) in the design, distribution and analysis of a simple questionnaire which determined what could be learnt from learners in their school about what mattered to them. It emerged from the research that six broad areas mattered to learners:

- School infrastructure: A learner described how "some of the buildings are in a dilapidated state with paint falling off and holes on the floor" (questionnaire data) while another wrote of "inadequate classroom buildings leading to learners studying under trees" (questionnaire data).
- Information and Communication Technology [ICT]: Learners were concerned that, despite it being on the timetable, ICT lessons were not offered in their school. One learner fumed: "What are the computers here for? It seems like the school does not have an understanding of using computers because I don't understand why there are lots of computers in the school that are not used and there is no ICT teacher (questionnaire data).
- The poor running of the library with its insufficient operating times: One learner argued that the "lack of textbooks cause poor performance since learners will have few reading time because they will be sharing" (questionnaire data). They therefore wanted the library opened so they could have access to further resources.
- Insufficient transportation: This was reasoned as follows: "the current bus is too small and old, so a new big bus needs to be bought" (questionnaire data).
- Electricity and water outages: One learner described how, "when one or both are gone, learners will not concentrate in classes with empty stomachs since there would be nothing to cook with" (questionnaire data).
- A lack of teacher professionalism: A learner explained how "lazy, rude teachers and teachers with bad attitudes are likely to affect our performance as learners since we will lose concentration on their subjects" (questionnaire data) while another described how "unhappy faces make us uncomfortable to ask questions in the class" (questionnaire data). Yet another learner was concerned that "some teachers are too much on jokes and by the time they get serious with the lesson,

time is over" (questionnaire data).

After a discussion facilitated by the Honours student, it was decided by the club members that finding solutions to five of the six problem areas listed above was beyond the scope of their influence. Thus one 'doable' focus area remained; that of making the school library functional and this became the focus of the club for the remainder of the year (reflective assignment 2). This focus area was an example of what Flutter calls a physical dimension which "offers students an opportunity to help improve a tangible aspect of learning in schools" (2006, p.184).

(d) Planning and implementing a change initiative: Getting the school library functional

Having chosen the dysfunctional library as their area of focus within the school, club members set about planning how to get the library up and running. In taking the initiative, they demonstrated their collective agency (Porteus, 2008) and leadership. With the assistance of the Honours student, their plan was enacted when they began clearing and cleaning the room which was, up until then, being used as a storeroom for the school's stationery (reflective assignment 2). The ventilation of the room was addressed and colourful curtains were hung to entice the learners in (reflective assignment 2). Thereafter, club members took responsibility for the arrangement of the existing books on the shelves using the Dewey Decimal system and they also designed borrowing cards for ease of book control. In addition, they drew up a weekly roster clearly indicating who was on duty. They also extended the operating hours of the original library and finally opened the library door to learners every afternoon from 17h00 – 19h45 (research report). We argue that learner involvement in these preliminary activities to get the library up and running constituted a good example of leadership because they brought about change in the school. Through their collective action learners changed their world (in this case the school) and made it better for themselves and their peers.

Once the library was up and running, management systems and processes (Bush, 2007) were needed to ensure its effective functioning. For example, club members soon learnt that issues of ill-discipline needed to be addressed. In addition, noise in the library as well as the non-return of loaned books could not be tolerated (research report). The need for some library rules therefore emerged. To deal with transgressions to the rules, club members instituted ad hoc disciplinary meetings but it was not long before they realised that these took up much of their already limited time. As a result, they decided to hold these disciplinary meetings on Wednesdays which gave them plenty of additional time to manage the library on a daily basis (research report). Thus, aside from leadership development, club members also developed management capacity as they worked to keep the library functional. This requirement to develop both leadership and management competence in learners echoes the work of Bush who contends that "both leadership and management need to be given equal prominence if schools are to

operate effectively (2007, p. 392).

(e) Developing learner voice

There was sufficient evidence to suggest that the club provided opportunities for learners to develop their voice in a space in which they would 'be heard' (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Through active engagement in the resurrection of the library, and through actively doing things rather than just watching (Smyth, 2006b, p. 295), learners developed the confidence to speak. This is in line with the call in the Namibian policy document *Toward education for all* (Namibia. Ministry of Education and Culture, 1992), which reminds us that "learners are speakers as well as listeners" (p. 8). For example, when a group of male learners entered the library purposely making a noise, the club member in charge did not panic or react negatively. Instead she handled the situation professionally, spoke authoritatively and with a sense of humour: "*Guys, the bar is closed but the library is open please*" (observation notes). Amidst some confusion, they asked what she meant and another club member politely replied that "*there is a difference between the two please*" (observation notes). This simple approach worked and the unruly learners continued into the library without further disturbance. The confidence to speak was further evidenced when some learners were observed trying to borrow books from the reference section. The club member on duty discouraged such a practice saying, "*The things in the reference section are in short supply and if they get lost they will become extinct*" (observation notes).

Like Whitehead (2009), we argue that confidence is central to the development of learner voice and leadership. Confidence to speak can be developed in safe and supportive spaces such as learner leadership clubs and through involvement in school change initiatives when learners have a vested interest. By providing learners with opportunities such as these, they become 'powerful people' because of a genuine sense that they really 'can do it' (Smyth, 2006b, p. 292).

(f) Developing learner leadership

Leadership attributes

Learners were vocal about the qualities necessary for good learner leadership. Club members indicated that in order to execute leadership effectively, learners needed to be self-confident, determined, exemplary, caring, motivating, committed, accountable, respectful and honest (questionnaire data). The attribute of being 'exemplary' topped the list as the most important learner leadership trait, according to the learners in this study. Having a 'high self esteem' was another trait which was deemed important as it kept them focused. This resonates with the view of Whitehead (2009) that authentic leaders are self-confident yet not overly egoistic. Flexibility was a further attribute suggested and, as one learner explained, "we have to act accordingly whenever among friends and be able to act differently when conducting the leadership roles" (focus group interview).

The attribute of autonomy was centrally important to the club members. They appreciated being afforded the autonomy to manage the library on their own. They explained how the absence of teachers in their venue made them feel at home; one learner explained that having "little interference of teachers" (focus group interview) was a motivating factor. Clearly too much teacher presence would have had a negative influence; it would have eroded learner autonomy by "constricting the club members' ideas" (focus group interview) and affecting "the visitation of learners to the library" (focus group interview). Thus being afforded the autonomy to run the library was "enlightening" to them and increased their confidence. However, they soon realised that their increased responsibility and elevated position - they were now "above other learners" (focus group interview) - required that they "adjust their ways of behaving accordingly" (focus group interview). The centrality of autonomy for the development of learner leadership resonates with Smyth's point that learners should be given "significant ownership of their learning in other than tokenistic ways" (2006a, p. 282).

The club members highlighted that it was not an easy task leading other learners but they used the slogan of "together we can" (focus group interview). Thus theirs was a collaborative endeavour which, as Mitra and Gross argue, "comes with an expectation of youth sharing the responsibility for the vision of the group, the activities planned and the group process that facilitates the enactment of these activities" (2009, p. 530). Winning the respect of other learners was also mentioned as a key factor that kept club members motivated. They initially expected the worst – that the learners in the school would not take them seriously but, in direct contrast, they gained the respect of their peers. This was evidenced in the number of learners who frequented the library and it provided the motivation necessary for the club members to continue with their sometimes arduous work in the library. Here we are reminded of Smyth's point that for learner leadership to be developed, an environment needs to be fostered in which learners "are treated with respect and trust rather than fear and threats of retribution" (2006a, p. 282). Flutter holds a similar view when she argues that respect is at the core of learner participation; it is about "feeling that you matter in a school, that you belong, that it is 'your school' and that you have something to contribute" (2006, p. 191).

To ensure the respect of learners, the club members deemed role modelling important as indicated in the following extract: "As people in charge of the library trying to inculcate the love of reading in other learners, it will be impossible to reach that goal if we are not modelling reading ourselves (focus group interview)". This excerpt speaks to the qualities of integrity and authenticity and constitutes an example of what Starratt (2007) refers to as the activity of becoming real, becoming true to oneself and he argues that it is "the most weighty of life's moral activities" (p. 169).

Towards the end of the academic year, club members indicated how their general conduct changed after dealing with the numerous requests, demands and problems of

their fellow learners. As one learner reflected, "My attitudes have changed for good, I would be a careless mother but now I know what is right and wrong and will teach it to them [her 'future' children]"(Focus group interview). Here we get a sense of the learner discovering who she wants to be and projecting forward to a time of wisdom and full maturity.

Leadership skills

Learners were equally vocal about the 'skills' necessary for good learner leadership. They made much of the need for listening skills, problem-solving skills and organisational skills. Listening skills were considered important. For example, one learner wrote that "leading requires a good listener that is capable of listening to others problems and complaints and keep secrets in your heart" (questionnaire data). Likewise, being a good listener is one of the characteristics that learners in Whitehead's (2009) study identified as being important for adolescent leaders.

Problem solving was also considered a key skill. A club member indicated that "it takes a critical thinker to solve a problem amicably; hence exposing learners to leadership develops their cognitive skills" (focus group interview). The discussion that followed suggested that problem solving skills did not only have to be developed in relation to violent or ruthless activities such as fighting and stealing, but that they also needed to be developed in relation to personal issues such as maltreatment and bullying of learners (focus group interview). There was agreement amongst the club members that they had developed problem solving skills as a result of their involvement in the activities of the club. One learner saw the value of this learning for her future goals: "My skills will add to my aspiration of being a nurse specifically to counsel other people and to find solution to their problems. I will also be a good person in the community because problems such as arguing and fighting are common in the public" (focus group interview).

Organisational skills were also deemed important in the development of learner leadership. During a focus group interview carried out towards the end of the intervention, learners spoke of the organisational skills they had acquired as a consequence of their involvement in the club. A club member revealed that "arranging the library right from the beginning of the intervention to ensuring that books are replaced back in the shelves and tiding up the environment is quite challenging and yet life enriching" (focus group interview). Another club member explained as follows: "I have developed organising skills, and I will employ those skills to venture into catering because it involves organising tables and venues and keeping the utensils neat and the place tidy"(focus group interview).

This process of skills development is echoed in the work of Flutter (2006) who contends that it inspires learners when they are given control and responsibility and placed in the driving seat. Drawing on the work of the Sorrell Foundation (2004), Flutter explains how through this experience of leadership, learners discover "creative and life skills such as

problem-solving, team working, communication, negotiation and citizenship, all of which engender self-belief and confidence" (2006, p. 188).

(g) *The challenges experienced in implementing the school change initiative*
Whilst there was evidence of leadership development in learners through the club activities, they experienced a number of challenges. These challenges included constraints related to time, an individual's academic performance, parents' understanding of the importance of learner leadership as well as finances (questionnaire data). In addition, low self-esteem, low voice pitch, a lack of remuneration, one's personal background as well as carelessness (questionnaire data) were listed as challenges to the development of learner leadership. Limited by word count, we discuss only the main challenge.

Time is often cited in the literature as a major obstacle to learner participation in school matters (see for example Fielding, 2006; Flutter, 2006 and Shuttle, 2007). Similarly, time was considered the main constraint to learner leadership in this Namibian secondary school. All club members involved in the study cited "time constraints" as a hindrance to learner leadership (questionnaire data). A learner reasoned that "time has been a constraint because you have to divide it between the school's tasks and the leading roles that all demand full attention" (focus group interview). Another learner explained that "time is never enough between running the library and studying for tests" (focus group interview). As a consequence of limited time and the additional library service offered, club members became fatigued. This was particularly the case in the evenings when they opened the library for the rest of the school. While others were studying, they were on duty and therefore felt that they deserved extra time (focus group interview). They raised the idea that the school rules might need to change as a consequence of their learner leadership work (focus group interview).

5.   CONCLUDING COMMENTS

Learner leadership is not common as a concept or a practice in the majority of schools in African countries such Namibia. However, if we wish to promote the development of learner leadership in our schools, there are a host of imaginative, appealing and authentic approaches to facilitating learner voice and enabling participation (Luff and Webster, 2014). The establishment of a learner leadership club as an extra-curricular activity is one such endeavour.

This article shared some of the findings of our Namibian research on whether leadership can be developed in learners through their involvement in extra-curricular leadership clubs and, if so, how. We argue that learners can indeed be developed as leaders through the introduction of learner leadership clubs in schools. Given the appropriate forum, learners are able to articulate what matters to them in schools –

they are able to develop a voice. And, as Busher (2012) asserts, learner voice is an integral component in constructing discourses of respect, empowerment and citizenship in schools. He continues to explain how "encouraging students to speak out about matters that concern them in school, whether in playgrounds, corridors, classrooms or lesions, helps teachers to see the school world through the eyes of the main actors in school and adapt their practices accordingly, albeit within the contexts of internal and external school policy discourses and teachers' own value-laden perspectives of practice" (Busher, 2012, p. 114).

In addition to the development of learner voice, the clubs, through their school change initiatives, provided a platform from which to act. We argue that, given the right conditions and concomitant support, learners can enact leadership, particularly when they have conceptualised the initiative. Because learners are central to school life, they are best placed to bring about school change. Participation in decision-making processes related to a change initiative, whatever it might be, is likely to develop learner agency and the competences necessary to lead.

Yet, leadership development of learners is unlikely to happen without bold leadership on the part of at least one teacher in a school. In this regard, Smyth calls for "courageous forms of leadership that fearlessly promote the importance of student ownership and student voice in respect of learning" (2006a, p. 282). In our study, the Honours students were the courageous teacher leaders who initiated the formation of the clubs and steered the change process. However, in the majority of the 32 schools in the Namibian case study, the clubs remained an adjunct to the schools' activities (after Shuttle, 2007), and were not sustained beyond the academic year. In other words, whole school take-up of the learner leadership initiatives did not occur. This may well be because schools, both locally and internationally, are generally overly concerned with standards, high stakes testing and accountability at the expense of developing in learners the core values of social justice, democracy, and equity. This is indeed a cause for concern as Namibia is a democratic society requiring citizens who are willing to participate, competent enough to think critically, able to distinguish between right and wrong, make wise civic choices and have a social conscience (Noddings, 2005). Surely this education for democracy should begin with learners in the country's schools?

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