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Exploring learner leadership in the context of rurality and multiple deprivations at four secondary schools in Ohangwena Region, Namibia

Shinana, Olivia Ndalikutala

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ABSTRACT

The issue of democracy and learner representation is juxtaposed against the cultural beliefs of rural residents. People in rural areas think less about what government policy says about learner participation and consider more what is commonly practised in their context and cultural grounds. Literature on learner leadership indicated that little research had been undertaken to determine the impact of learner leadership in the context of rurality and multiple deprivations. This study's primary goal was to explore learner leaders' conceptualisations, practices, and experiences in the context of rurality and multiple deprivations in four secondary schools in the Ohangwena Region. As a result, this study presents the findings of a qualitative case study on learner leadership in rural and multiple deprived secondary schools in Namibia using an emancipatory paradigm. Thematic analysis was used in conjunction with the Participatory Leadership Theory, Critical Theory, and Cultural Historical Activity Theory to analyse data generated in the study. The data was generated through semi-structured interviews with four secondary school principals, four liaison teachers, and eight parents (four school board chairpersons and four long-serving members), focus group discussions with thirteen learner leaders, questionnaires with the school principals and liaison teachers, and the document review.

The study revealed minimal learner participation in school leadership structures and decision-making processes. Due to the ambiguity of Namibia Education Act No. 16 of 2001, which fails to specify how schools should handle learner participation and representations, all participants in the researched schools were unsure of the roles of the Learner Representative Council in the school board and other structures. The challenges experienced include the rules and regulations; peer pressure; cultural beliefs and practices, lack of training provisions; parental discouragements and intimidation; lack of motivation; poverty, and language barriers. While this study recognised the impact of learner leadership implementation challenges in rural secondary schools, the researcher posits that the Ministry of Education, Arts, and Culture should develop guidelines to assist all stakeholders (school principals, teachers, and parents) who work directly with learner leaders, in understanding the importance of their leadership roles in schools.

Keywords: Learner leadership; multiple deprivations; Namibian secondary schools; participatory decision-making; rurality; school leadership.