Cultural implications for learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa

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The South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996, articulates the establishment of School Governing Bodies, which authorises stakeholders such as parents, educators and learners to participate actively in decision-making processes pertaining to school governance. The Act further stipulates that learners, through the Representative Council of Learners, should be afforded full opportunity to participate in crucial decisions by the broader governing body. The reason for undertaking the study reported on here was triggered by the concern raised by various authors about the high level of ineffectiveness of learners as governors of schools in South Africa. This study explored and analysed the significance of culture in relation to learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa. A qualitative research approach, based on a purposive sampling method and interviews, was espoused by engaging members of the Representative Council of Learners in certain selected high schools of the Harry Gwala district in KwaZulu-Natal. The findings of the empirical study investigation divulged that culture was one of the main impediments to learners' effective school governance in the rural South African setting. The study recommends the intervention of the Department of Education, with the view of creating an environment conducive to active learner participation in school governance in rural areas.

Keywords: representative council of learners; rural areas; school governance; school governing bodies; South African Schools Act

Introduction
The period between 1980 and 1989 beheld the dawn of an international trend towards the devolution of power to School Governing Bodies (SGBs), incorporating the representatives of the relevant stakeholders, and including learners (Carr & Williams, 2009; Edwards & DeMatthews, 2014). Many countries around the world promulgated laws which afforded secondary school learners the right to actively take part in decision-making processes, an act which was in line with the United Nations right of the child to be heard (United Nations, 2009). Learners from different cultural backgrounds around the world tend to respond differently to various activities that they are confronted with in the school environment. Joy and Kolb (2009) conducted a study that involved the behaviour of Asian and American students in the classroom. They found that the Asian students, from high power distance cultures, appeared quiet and reflective compared to their American counterparts. They concluded that learners from high uncertainty avoidance cultures appeared cautious and systematic in their approach, while those from low uncertainty avoidance cultures appeared more comfortable with risk, trial and confrontation.

Research Objective
The objective of this study was to investigate the significance of culture in determining the extent of learner effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa. As a means of achieving this objective, perceptions of members of Representative Councils of Learners (RCL) from selected rural high schools in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, were sought. These perceptions centred on the extent to which cultural influences impeded on learner effectiveness as governors of schools.

Literature Review
The advent of democracy in South Africa, typified by the elections of 27 April 1994, meant the conveyance of political power from the apartheid government to a democratic one. Consequently, a new constitution, with a commitment to a representative and participatory democracy, transparency, accountability and public engagement, was founded (Naidoo, 2005). In the educational domain, the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa 1996 provided a statute, the South African Schools Act, 84 of 1996 (SASA) with the aim of creation of a new relationship between the government and schools, underpinned by citizen participation and partnership between the state, the school personnel, learners and parents (Republic of South Africa, 1996). One of the prescriptions in the Act is the election of SGBs, constituted by parents, the teaching fraternity and learners (in the case of high schools). The Act further stipulates that it is obligatory for all public schools, enrolling learners in Grade 8 or higher, to have an RCL, democratically elected by learners. This RCL in turn elects two learners to represent the entire learner body in the SGB (Republic of South Africa, 1996).

In 1999 the Department of Education provided guidelines for RCLs and delineated their roles and responsibilities. One of the responsibilities of RCLs is to establish good communication and relations among learners, staff and community. Another responsibility is that of ensuring that they meet at regular intervals to

attend to suggestions, comments, complaints and ideas from the general learner body. It is also the responsibility of the RCLs to assist in maintaining order and promoting responsible learnership by ensuring that learners abide by the school rules (Department of Education, 1999).

Two decades have elapsed since the pronouncement of the SASA, yet learner governance in rural schools in South Africa is still experiencing numerous challenges. These challenges include learners not being recognised by adults within the SGBs as individuals who can contribute significantly to effective governance of schools. In certain instances, as I had hypothesised in this study, the upbringing or the cultural background of the learners rendered them ineffective in school governance. In spite of some intervention strategies by the Department of Education, purposed at capacity building of school governors, research has verified that learner participation in the SGBs was still confronted with copious challenges (Brown & Duku, 2008; Dieltiens, 2005; Duma, 2011, 2014; Grant Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Heystek, 2004; Mavuso & Duku, 2014; Mncube & Harber, 2013; Xaba, 2011). Even though the SASA advocates that RCLs should be acknowledged as full and authentic members of the SGBs, they are, however, not full participants as expected. It was therefore the aim of this study to establish the extent to which culture in rural South African Schools rendered learner governors either less effective or not effective at all.

Literature on the relationship between culture and education shows that there is an increasing recognition of the importance of culture in the day-to-day operations of educational institutions (Stephens, 2007). The same literature shows that culture can play a negative role in the extent of learners' effectiveness as governors of schools (Mncube, 2012). African children in many rural South African communities have been brought up in such a manner that they do not discuss issues with adults. Learners grow up knowing and accepting the fact that they are inferior, immature, irrational and incompetent compared to the adults. Furthermore, learners are accustomed to the fact that they cannot argue, criticise and challenge the values, doctrines and beliefs that are the very essence of African communities. This assertion is affirmed by Ndofirepi and Shumba (2014:235) who claim that children within the African culture are "a-social and a-cultural, passive and dependant." The more the child is quiet in front of the adult person, the more he/she is considered to be respectful.

Writing about the Ugandian society, Altinyelken (2010:167) had this to say: "children are brought up to respect adults and those in authority. Questioning or challenging them is not often considered appropriate behaviour." In similar vein, Chiwela (2010:66) had this to say about the Zambi-

an society: "children are brought up to believe that they should remain silent in the presence of adults. Hence the child may be hesitant to speak, while the adult is uncomfortable with the child who expresses an opinion." The adults involved in school governance in many African schools, therefore, are not ready to share the school space as equal decision-making partners with RCL members, from whom nothing substantial can come (Phaswana, 2010).

Theoretical Framework of Culture
For the purposes of this study, culture is underpinned by Hofstede's (2001) model on cultural dynamism. Acknowledging that culture is both an ubiquitous and slippery concept, Hofstede and Hofstede (2005:400) define culture as "the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another." They further perceive culture as comprising those ways of thinking and behaving that are taught by social groups, including family, friends and community, and developed through direct interaction from generation to generation.

Hofstede's model identifies five dimensions to assist in differentiating cultures, namely, power distance; individualism versus collectivism; masculinity versus femininity; uncertainty avoidance and short-term versus long-term orientation. Of the five dimensions, this study is aligned to power distance. Power distance is defined as "the extent to which less powerful members of institutions and organisations within a country expect and accept that power is distributed unequally" (Hofstede & Hofstede, 2005:402). This theoretical dimension of culture is significant, as the study was focused on a society that has embraced and accepted that power is distributed unequally. This is the society where a child has been made to accept that he/she is inferior and unequal to an adult person. In such societies, the elderly people are taken as the ones to take the lead and that children will have to follow suit. It is unexpected therefore, that the children can come up with ideas pertaining to life in general that they could sell to elderly people. When children from societies like these get exposed to responsibilities like being part of school governance, their upbringing influences their extent of contribution to governance.

Conceptualising learner governance in schools
For this study, governance is conceptualised on the basis of governance as it relates to learners in schools. Governance "encompasses the relationships and procedures that determine how authority is exercised and resources are managed, how other role-players make their voices heard, and how those in authority are held accountable" (Pendlebury, 2011:43). Governance is a necessity whenever power is exercised for the common good, be it in a region, a country, or any of a wide range of insti-

tutions and organisations, including businesses, clinics and schools (Woolman & Fleisch, 2008). It incorporates the outline for ruling; the principles and values that shape the interplay between power holders and society at large; and also how power dynamics play out within governing structures (Tikly, 2003).

Learner governance, in particular, is conceptualised on the basis of the guidelines for the establishment, election and function of students' RCLs (Department of Education, 1999). In terms of the guidelines, it is the responsibility of the RCLs to develop unity among learners in the school; to keep learners informed about the events in the school and in the community; to address the needs of all learners in the school; to inspire good associations among the teaching and non-teaching staff and learners; to hearten good relationship between the teachers and the parents and to institute prolific acquaintances with the RCLs in other schools (Department of Education, 1999).

Research Methodology
I embraced a qualitative research technique because it was exploratory in nature and was used to gain an understanding of fundamental reasons, opinions and motivations (Malhotra, 2007). Also, this research method was adopted because it helped to uncover trends in thoughts and opinions, and delve deeper into the problem (Bryman, Bell, Hirsch-

sohn, Dos Santos, Du Toit, Masenge, Van Aardt & Wagner, 2016). The research approach facilitated entry into the participants' life world to discover their practical experiences. Bogdan and Biklen (2003) state that a qualitative research approach empowers the researcher to better understand human behaviour and experience. It enables the researcher to focus on that which takes place within their natural environment and the extent of its significance and to attain an in-depth understanding of how respondents perceive things (Gay & Airasian, 2003). This research method also affords researchers an opportunity to avail themselves in the research setting (Mackey & Gass, 2016). Therefore, I adopted this research method to discover the role played by RCLs in rural South African schools. I also deemed this research approach appropriate as the aim of the study was to investigate the influence of culture on learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa.

The research design for this study took the form of a case study, involving 10 high schools in the Harry Gwala district of KwaZulu-Natal, an area teeming with historically disadvantaged schools. This exercise took the greater part of 2016 to complete. The study population constituted 35 executive RCL members from 10 high schools from a total of 22 high schools in Umzimkulu, a circuit within the district. The demographic features of the participants in the study are illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1 Demographic features of study participants

School	Male	Female	Grade 10	Grade 11	Grade 12
No 1	2	2	1	3	0
No 2	1	1	2	1	0
No 3	3	1	1	2	1
No 4	1	2	0	2	1
No 5	2	2	0	2	2
No 6	2	1	1	2	0
No 7	3	1	1	2	1
No 8	2	2	1	3	0
No 9	1	2	0	3	0
No 10	2	1	1	1	1

The rationale for choosing this study site was the fact that Umzimkulu is categorised as rural, as opposed to urban. The 10 high schools (which offer teaching in Grades 10 to 12) were selected on the basis of easy accessibility, geographical proximity, and respondents' relevance and willingness to participate in the study, given my time and financial constraints. Convenience sampling, as a type of nonprobability or non-random sampling, was preferred because the participants met certain practical criteria such as the ones indicated above (Creswell, 2009). The selection of the respondents in this research was purposive in nature. This permitted me to sample the participants that were relevant to the objective posed (Bryman & Bell, 2015). According to Landsverk, Brown, Chamberlain, Palinkas, Ogihara, Czaja, Goldhaber-Fiebert, Rolls Reutz and

Horwitz (2012), a purposive sampling approach is a non-probability method of sampling that is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and selection of information-rich cases related to the subject under investigation. It places the investigator's research questions and objectives at the heart of the sampling considerations (Bryman & Bell, 2015). In this research, purposive respondent selection consisted of the RCLs from the 10 high schools that were identified as the population of interest. An arrangement was made with the principals of the 10 schools with regard to how and when to meet with their learners. Time slots that would not interfere with the teaching and learning at these schools were arranged.

As a means of collecting data, I used semi-structured one-on-one interviews with open-ended

questions. Some questions that featured in the study were the following:

1) How does your upbringing influence your interaction with adults?
2) How do you perceive the attitudes of the adult members of the SGB towards you as learners?
3) How do adult members of the SGB treat you during SGB meetings?
4) How confident are you in airing your views in the midst of elderly people?
5) During SGB meetings, do you feel like the adult members of the SGB are eager and looking forward to getting valuable ideas and opinions from you?

According to Mojtahed, Nunes, Martins and Peng (2014), semi-structured interviews comprise several key questions that help define the areas to be explored, but also allow the interviewer to deviate to pursue a response or an idea in more detail. Semi-structured interviews provide respondents with some guidance on what to talk about and further allow the detection or amplification of information that is important to the respondents, but may not have been previously regarded as relevant by the researcher (O'Leary, 2004). This research instrument was chosen because it permits the researcher to investigate questions, while at the same time ensuring evenness in the main questions raised to each participant. This instrument was also selected after having acknowledged the fact that the majority of the participants could find it difficult to respond to questions in means other than one-on-one interviews. This was based on the assertion that learners would not be able to get clarity on the questions if the one-on-one type interviews were not used.

The questions that featured in the interviews were first drafted in English, but were later translated into Zulu, the local language of the participants. After consultation with the respondents, interviews were conducted in Zulu and the participants were allowed to reflect on issues beyond those that featured in the interview questions. The direct two-way conversational communication gave room for substantial suppleness concerning the scope and depth of the interviews (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005). The questions that were raised in the interviews revolved around the role played by culture in determining the extent of effectiveness of learners as governors of schools in the rural areas of South Africa. As a means of ensuring the trustworthiness of the study, I confirmed that the interviews for each respondent were conducted using the same format and sequence of words and questions (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). After securing the respondents' informed consent, a video camera was used to gather data. During the whole process of data gathering, the respondents' right to anonymity and privacy was respected. The respondents were given assurance that the study was aimed at unearthing some of the challenges they faced as learner governors and that their anonymity would be respected. They were also assured that the information they provided would be treated in the strictest of confidence.

I adopted the "audio-visual-data-as-an-object-of-analysis" (AVO) approach to the analysis of data. According to Figueroa (2008:3), "the analysis of audio-visual data as a phenomenon to be studied (AVO perspective) emphasises audio-visual medial data as a specific final product which has been construed by that medium." The data that were collected during the interviews were translated from Zulu into English, and are presented in italics in the results and discussion section. The data were analysed using a document analysis method. Document analysis is a qualitative research approach in which documents are construed by the researcher to provide voice and meaning to the participants' actions (Babbie & Mouton, 2005). It also integrates coding content into themes similar to how interview materials are analysed (Viswambharan & Priya, 2016). The participants' responses were transliterated and coded and then congregated according to the questions raised. In other words, the collected data were organised according to the research questions of the study. To ensure a more efficient data analysis process, the data were coded into easily understandable concepts, properties and patterns. According to Bennett, Barrett and Helmich (2019:10), "coding means selecting a chunk of data and assigning a summary term or code, descriptive or interpretative, that is meaningful in terms of the research questions." After the coding of the data, themes or patterns were developed in order to gain deeper insight into the meaning of the data. The themes that were generated had to do with 1) learners' confidence in expressing themselves freely in the company of adults, 2) the perceived attitude of the adults towards the learners during SGB meetings 3) the perceived belittling of learners' contributions during SGB meetings, 4) learners' feeling of acceptance as significant participants in SGB meetings.

Results and Discussion
An analysis of the responses from the participants revealed that culture was one of the main impediments to learners' effectiveness as governors of schools in rural South Africa. Much as the establishment of the SGBs was meant to democratise schools, there was a distinct difference between the Western and African traditions of democracy, with the latter having an impact on the extent of learner participation (Mncube & Harber, 2013). Mariam (2010) maintains that African democracy has its roots in African culture and history and the uniqueness of African democracy lies in the fact that it portrays the socio-cultural authenticity of the country in which it features.

Theme 1: Learners' Confidence in Expressing Themselves Freely in the Company of Adults

Learners whose background is entrenched in the African culture grow up knowing that they are mediocre, illogical and bungling compared to the adults. This is consistent with Ndofirepi and Shumba's (2014:235) observation that children within the African culture are "a-social and a-cultural, passive and dependent." Within the African culture, young people are also habituated to the reality that they cannot criticise, contend and contest the values, beliefs and doctrines that are the kernel of African communities.

One RCL member said:

The way we were brought up does not give us confidence to speak freely in these SGB meetings. In these meetings we sit with teachers, members of the non-teaching personnel and parents, all of whom are parents to us. More often than not, we find it hard to freely express ourselves in their company. To us, confronting our parents would be tantamount to disrespect and that is against our African culture.

Theme 2: The Perceived Attitude of the Adults Towards the Learners During SGB Meetings

Another RCL member had this to say:

It becomes very difficult for us to voice out our opinions because you can see that the other members of the SGB have an attitude towards young people. It's like they say, 'there's nothing substantial that can come from a young person.'

Theme 3: The Perceived Belittling of Learners' Contributions During SGB Meetings

Another RCL member commented thus:

Sometimes we do say a few things here and there in these SGB meetings, but all that is not taken seriously. We attribute this to our African culture which emphasises that fact that an adult will always be the authority and young people cannot tell the adults what to do, instead it should be the other way round.

Theme 4: Learners' Feeling of Acceptance as Significant Participants in SGB Meetings

One RCL member said:

The main issue here is that our African culture prescribes that when adult people meet to deliberate on particular issues, children are precluded from being part of that meeting. When we are invited to these SGB meetings, we know that we have to respect our parents and teachers because that is what our culture prescribes for us. That being the case, it becomes very difficult for us to say anything because we would feel as though we are insulting the adults if we tell them how we feel about certain issues under discussion. We are aware that according to the Department of Education policy on learner participation in the SGBs, we have a legal right to express our views and deliberate on any issues that have to be attended to by the SGB. However, our culture does not make it easy for us to air our views. There is no one among the SGB members who can prohibit us from saying anything, but it just becomes automatic that we become silent in the midst of the adult people.

In addition to their feeling of non-acceptance in the company of the elderly people, one RCL member had this to say:

In our African culture, when adults meet to deliberate on a particular matter, there shouldn't be young people in their company. Now when we become RCL members, we have to mix with the adults to discuss matters pertaining to school governance, it becomes difficult for us to speak freely in front of our parents and teachers. We always feel that if we express our views in these meetings, that will be interpreted as a sign of disrespect for the adult people. Even if sometimes you have an idea that you would like to share with the entire SGB, you shy off because you know your place in the African culture: that you cannot advise the elders on what they need to do. Also, it becomes difficult for us to query things even when we feel that some things need to be corrected.

Contemporary studies on the involvement of learners in school governance concur that learners are not afforded the necessary opportunities to make momentous contributions to effective school governance (Duma, 2014; Mbunyuza-de Heer Menlah, 2014). These studies validate that, in many instances, learners are side-lined when it comes to certain issues that have to be tackled by the entire SGB. For instance, when it comes to issues affecting the teachers, these studies reveal that learners are not invited to meetings where these issues are discussed. The study conducted by the Resources Aimed at the Prevention of Child Abuse and Neglect (RAPCAN) (Safer Spaces, 2020), revealed that there was a dearth of RCL support and acknowledgement by adult people, which then emasculates learners' right to legitimate involvement in school governance. This study established that the RCLs' aptitude to participate in school governance is disadvantaged by adults' judgments on the place of children in society. According to this study, the learners are of the view that adult people are of the opinion that RCL members' participation in SGB matters should be confined to information sharing, sporadic consultation on their opinion or view, but should not embrace the right to influence decisions.

The findings of the studies highlighted above are divergent from the findings of some earlier studies which found that learners were vigorously participating in decision-making processes without discrimination. For instance, in his study, Mncube (2008) established that learners were acknowledged as authentic members of the SGBs. He then quotes one learner who said:

When you [learner] *attend the meetings of the SGB, they* [adult governors] *make you feel like you are one of them and you forget that you are a learner. This makes us feel that we are fully accepted as members of the SGB and not only there for window-dressing.*

The fact that this study illustrates learners being actively involved in SGB deliberations without problems, might be ascribed to the setting under which the study was conducted. The schools in urban areas and/or former Model C schools, tend to have learners from a more liberal cultural background than those from rural African communities, whose culture renders them passive in the company of adults. This study has found that learners serving in SGBs in rural areas are confronted with encounters such as negative attitudes of some SGB members, the lack of recognition and support by some SGB members, which then results in learners being ineffective as governors of schools.

Conclusion
This study sought to examine the role of culture in determining the degree of success of learners as governors of schools in rural South Africa. The involvement of learners in SGBs in South Africa is purposed at the improvement of the day-to-day functioning of the schools and the solidification of democracy in the country. However, some obstacles, like the African culture, are still hindering learners' effectiveness as governors of schools, especially in the rural areas. This observation is in keeping with other observations that have been established around the world, pertaining to differences in behaviour by learners from different cultural backgrounds. The findings of this study reveal that as much as learners are by law expected to play a significant role in school governance, they are, however, not effective in this role as a consequence of cultural hindrances. The reported negative attitude of some teachers and parents towards RCL members within the SGBs was a manifestation of the cultural stereotypes that are prevalent in African communities. As far as these teachers and parents are concerned, a young person can contribute nothing substantial in the midst of adults.

The findings of the study have also shown that besides the negative attitudes of some teachers and parents in the SGBs, learners themselves are trapped in the African cultural enclave. Their upbringing makes them feel inferior, immature and, therefore, less competent compared to the teacher and parent components of the SGBs. The accounts given by the respondents in this study indicate that the members of the RCLs in rural South African schools are adversely affected by the culture under which they were brought up. This situation results in them being less effective or not effective at all as governors of schools. This study has, therefore, revealed that despite the 21 years of constitutional democracy in South Africa and the fact that the RCLs are the only legal structures representing learners in schools, learners still experience difficulties in being fully involved in school governance in the rural areas, mainly as a consequence of their cultural background.

Recommendations
I recommend that the Department of Education should take serious cognisance of the extent to which learners are effective as governors of schools in rural South Africa. Learners should not just feature in SGB structures for name's sake, but should rather actively take part in all SGB deliberations and should be part of the discussions of all issues that require the SGB's attention. It is further recommended that the Department of Education ensures the creation of space for learners to participate significantly in SGB activities. This would sanction learners to exercise their right to participation, thus enabling them to engage prolifically in all the deliberations pertaining to school governance. It is also recommended that training and workshops be organised for SGBs in rural schools, with the intention of positively influencing the attitudes of the old towards the young and vice-versa. Teachers and parents serving in the SGBs need be educated about the way in which they need to interact with RCL members, so that the latter could be accommodated in all decision-making processes. I also endorse that the Department of Education should provide formal support in terms of alerting adult teachers, parents and RCL members about their roles and responsibilities to facilitate ways in which these stakeholders can relate to each other collaboratively to accomplish school goals. This departmental intervention should ensure that cultural issues are tackled to assuage the African cultural stereotypes that end up hindering the effectiveness of learners as governors of schools.

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