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Building a culture of democracy: learner elections, leadership training and electoral integrity in schools

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Abstract

The election of learners to representative bodies or leadership positions in schools often fail to uphold democratic principles. With this study we critically examined the democratic nature of learner elections in South African primary and secondary schools. A survey, using convenience sampling, was conducted among learners and educators. We incorporated Habermas's discourse ethics to evaluate the role of schools in fostering democratic engagement. The findings reveal that election officers and educators often lack democratic literacy, learners face undue influence, and elections frequently mirror popularity contests rather than substantive democratic processes. Since learners are not inherently familiar with democracy, public schools serve as crucial spaces for cultivating democratic values and procedures. Conducting representative councils for learners (RCL) and leader elections democratically could foster educational transformation while promoting learners' personal growth and leadership development. We recommend reforming learner election procedures and creating structures that ensure meaningful learner participation and leadership training.

Keywords: democracy; education law; election process; leader elections; leadership development; representative council for learners; school governance; school policy

Introduction

The principles of democracy extend beyond the realm of national governance, influencing a wide range of social institutions – including schools. More than a century ago, John Dewey (2016), in his seminal work, *Democracy in Education*, highlighted the reciprocal relationship between democracy and education: democracy shapes education and education, in turn, shapes democracy. Dewey believed that democracy was an ethical ideal (a way of life), rather than a political arrangement, and that participation rather than representation is the essence of democracy. Central to his educational philosophy is the pragmatic principle of experiential learning – the idea that learners construct knowledge most effectively through direct, meaningful experiences (Dewey, 1938). In Dewey's view, schools should function as miniature democratic societies where learners actively participate, inquire and reflect, thereby cultivating the habits and dispositions necessary for democratic life.

Accordingly, schools are critical spaces where democratic values must be applied and cultivated (Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011). One practical expression of this is the election of learners to leadership positions at schools, a democratic practice that could foster civic engagement and a deeper understanding of participatory governance. However, undemocratic election practices occur from time to time which undermine the advancement of democracy and responsible citizenship (Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011). Unfair aspects of society are often mirrored in the education system, and when such practices persist in schools, they ultimately become embedded and misshape the broader national culture and ethos (Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011:59). Smit and Oosthuizen (2011) explain that a lack of clear guidelines and standardised measuring instruments for regulating the election of leaders or representative councils for learners (RCLs) result in irregularities or undemocratic practices.

Existing research focuses on the functionality of RCLs (Carr & Williams, 2009; Hunt, 2014; Mabovula, 2009; Phaswana, 2010) rather than the democratic integrity of electoral processes. Mabovula (2009:230) found little evidence of democratic participation in school governance by RCL members at some schools in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. In a survey conducted by the Gauteng Department of Education ([GDE], 2013) in 256 schools it was found that 18.6% of the respondents (709 learners who had served on RCLs) were dissatisfied with the election process, while 27.4% stated that RCL elections were not open to all learners. According to De Bruin (2006), certain aspects of RCL elections in schools are not truly democratic, with some procedures failing to promote transparency, participation, and accountability. Similarly, Salzwedel (2010) found that RCL elections often resembled popularity contests, resulting in the exclusion of candidates with the strongest leadership qualities. However, despite its relevance, the existing body of literature on school elections of learners to leadership positions reflects a temporal gap and remains limited, indicating a significant lacuna in scholarly enquiry. While academic literature and theoretical discussions (Isaacs, 2021; Phaswana, 2010; Waghid, 2022; Woolman & Fleisch, 2008) offer valuable insight into democracy in education, there remains a notable deficiency of empirical research focussed on democratic election practices for learners in leadership positions in schools. In response to this gap, we present the findings of an empirical study on the election of

learners to leadership positions in public schools. We engage with relevant legal and theoretical frameworks and propose reforms to enhance democratic participation in schools.

Theoretical Framework

In this study we drew on Dewey's civic education theory (Dewey, 1916/1966), emphasising that democratic experiences in schools contribute to the development of democracy. We also focussed on Habermas's (1996) theories of discourse ethics which highlight the role of fostering deliberative (discursive) democracy in fostering open participation.

Habermas's discourse ethics and deliberative democracy

Habermas (1996) contends that legitimate democratic decision-making arises from rational discourse among stakeholders. Schools, as microcosms of democracy, should foster deliberative engagement (reasonable discourse) among learners through structured election processes that encourage open discussion, equal participation, and transparent decision-making. Prior to this research it seemed that RCL elections at secondary schools and the election of leaders in primary schools often failed to uphold these principles, resulting in an environment where discourse is limited, democratic principles are not adhered to, and learner agency is constrained.

Conceptualising democracy

Democracy is a multifaceted concept which has evolved over the centuries, from direct democracy in ancient Athens to modern models such as representative, participative, deliberative and cultural democracy (Asenbaum, 2026; Blaug & Schwarzmantel, 2000; Cunningham, 2002; Economou, Kyriazis & Platias, 2022; Habermas, 1996; Hendriks, 2023; Wahlström, 2022). The main democratic theories include direct democracy, liberal democracy, republicanism, Schumpeterian elitist democracy, social democracy, participative democracy, deliberative (discursive) democracy, agonistic democracy and transformative democracy (Asenbaum, 2026; Blaug & Schwarzmantel, 2000; Hendriks, 2023). These theories are not discussed in detail, as much scholarly research has been devoted to this topic (Asenbaum, 2026; Blaug & Schwarzmantel, 2000; Chapman & Dunstan, 1990; Cunningham, 2002; Dewey, 1916/1966; Fishkin & Laslett, 2003; Habermas, 1996; Held, 2006; Kotzé, 2004; Kymlicka & Wayland, 1996; Schumpeter, 1943; Smit, 2009; Steyn, Du Plessis & De Klerk, 1999; Tarrant, 1989; Wiklund, 2005).

Given that the concept of democracy is inherently dynamic and continuously evolving (Asenbaum, 2026), it is not possible to provide a single, all-encompassing definition. Nevertheless,

the closest workable approximation to a definition of democracy, which reflects the consensus of most scholars is: a political, cultural and societal system in which power or authority is exercised through institutions and practices that are grounded in the principles of freedom and equality, enabling autonomous choice or elections, inclusive participation, public deliberation, and accountable representation (Hendriks, 2023). Asenbaum (2026), however, argues that the normative approach – rather the nominal and practice approaches – is the most suitable for understanding democracy as it emphasises freedom and equality as foundational values that define genuinely democratic systems. As a normative framework for political or societal decision-making, deliberative democracy emphasises ideals such as open discourse, rational legislation, participatory politics and civic self-governance (Cunningham, 2002). However, despite the plurality of perspectives and innovative approaches to democratic theory, substantive political and organisational democracy, in whatever form it is defined, has yet to be fully realised anywhere in the world and is certainly lacking within many institutions or organisations (Asenbaum, 2026).

Literature Review: Democracy, Education, Election of School Leaders, Representative Councils of Learners ("RCLs") and the Law

An inextricable relationship exists between education, democracy and the law, as is clear from the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996 (hereafter, the Constitution), education-specific legislation and international law (Dewey, 1916/1966; Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011). The founding provision, section 1, of the Constitution (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a) affirms that South Africa is a constitutional democracy rooted in the rule of law. The Children's Act (RSA, 2005) affirms the right of children to participate in decisions that affect their lives. Correspondingly, the preamble of the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996b) emphasises that democratic transformation of education should serve the interests of all South Africans and uphold their fundamental rights. Section 4(b) of this Act stipulates that policies must be developed to promote the advancement of democracy within the education system.

A fundamental challenge for any democratic society is to educate successive generations in democratic values, legal principles, and responsible citizenship (Ruitenberg, 2015; Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011). Can schools truly function democratically, or is their traditional structure inherently authoritarian? Some school principals, educators and parents are concerned that introducing democratic practices could undermine authority and lead to unmanageable classrooms, as the

majority of learners could allow their preferences to dominate the schools (Smit, 2013).

The process of democratising schools necessitates the inculcation of knowledge, values, and attitudes that translate into substantive democratic engagement by means of education (Aspin, 1995; Kiess, 2021; Ruitenberg, 2015). During the 1990s, the decentralisation of education, aligned with participatory democratic theory, became a key component of global educational restructuring (Aspin, 1995; Karlsson, 2002; Sayed, 1999). The notions of participation and deliberation emerged as fundamental tenets in the promotion of democratic school governance (Grant Lewis & Naidoo, 2004; Mncube, Davies & Naidoo, 2015). However, Smit and Oosthuizen (2011) found that the weaknesses of various democratic traditions are evident in the South African education system. Since learners are not inherently equipped with an understanding of democracy, public schools serve as crucial incubators or nurseries for democratic learning (Dayton, 1994; Haraldstad, Tveit & Kovač, 2022; Kiess, 2021; Ruitenberg, 2015). In a sociological study, Kiess (2021) presents compelling empirical evidence that students at schools and universities who participate in democratic activities such as student councils and class speakers develop stronger political trust and are more likely to vote and engage in political participation. This study was done in nine European countries and showed that democracy practiced early becomes active democratic citizenship at later stages in the students' lives (Kiess, 2021).

Democracy in schools, election regulations and guidelines

To effectively implement democracy in public schools, it is essential to understand the relevant legal provisions, administrative guidelines, and core principles of democratic practice. In this regard, section 11(1) of the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996c) provides for a representative council of learners (RCL) to be established at every secondary or combined public school that enrolls learners from Grade 8 or higher (Department of Education [DoE], 2003). However, in practice many primary schools also hold annual elections for learner leaders, usually learners in Grade 7, who may be referred to by various titles such as leaders, prefects or learner council members. In this article the term "leaders" is used to refer to elected primary school learners that serve on a leadership body or council.

The RCL is a body of elected learner leaders in secondary schools established to serve and represent the interests of the student body. The RCL may also select two of its members to serve on the school's governing body (SGB). South Africa is unique in this respect as RCL learners that

serve on SGBs have full voting rights in all non-contractual matters of school governance that affect their daily school experience. The provincial member of the executive council for education (MEC) is responsible for determining the functions and procedures for the election of RCLs (RSA, 1996c). In terms of the Personnel Administration Measures (DoE, RSA, 2001), deputy-principals manage RCL elections.

The regulations and guidelines regarding RCL elections vary to some extent across the nine provinces in South Africa (DoE, 2003; Northern Cape Department of Education [NCDE], 2016; Northern Province [NP], 2000; Western Cape Department of Education [WCDE], 2008). The respective provincial guidelines contain similar provisions that stipulate the following: two representatives (one male and one female) should be elected for each grade or class, where practicable, to serve on the RCL; the head of department appoints an election officer (usually the deputy-principal) who is assisted by class educators (electoral assistants); only learners in the Grade 8 and above may serve on the RCL. In RCL elections, each candidate must be nominated and seconded in writing by their peers. The electoral assistant compiles a list of all candidates, which is then displayed on the class notice board. Voters should be checked against the appropriate school register which serves as a voters' roll. Elections are conducted by secret ballot, with each learner entitled to one vote per vacant position on the RCL. RCL elections typically take place annually in the first or the last quarter and should ideally align with democratic principles. The guidelines further specify that RCL leaders should be elected to an executive committee, which consists of a president, deputy-presidents, secretary, and treasurer. In addition, RCL members may serve in portfolios such as media, sport, culture, education, or any other sub-committee deemed necessary (DoE, 2003; NCDE, 2016; NP, 2000; WCDE, 2008).

While guidelines do not mandate the election of leaders or learner councils in primary schools, they do not prohibit it either. Primary schools' internal policies may, therefore, regulate the election of learner representatives and leaders in primary schools.

Democratic principles

The practice of democracy in schools should align with the education that citizens receive; otherwise, the influence of the surrounding environment will undermine the lessons learned in early schooling (Parry & Moran, 1994:48). Wahlström (2022) revisited Dewey's idea of civic literacy and found that when learning occurs through responsible, reflective classroom discourse (i.e. dialogue rooted in democratic values) schools become more than knowledge factories, they become places where

democratic sensibilities take shape. In empirical studies, Fishkin (2011) concluded that deliberative (discursive) democracy tended to produce outcomes which are superior to those in other forms of democracy.

The four principles of deliberative democracy, namely, generality, autonomy, power neutrality and ideal role-taking, serve as benchmarks for assessing substantive democracy (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003; Habermas, 1996; Lafont, 2020). Applying the principles of discourse ethics (which undergird deliberative and participative democracy) means, in practice, that voters should be educated before an election about the purpose and procedure of the democratic process, as well as the features of effective leadership and the functions of the leaders or RCL (ideal role-taking). All affected parties should have the right to participate, ensuring that every eligible voter can cast a ballot, with each vote carrying equal weight (generality) (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003; Habermas, 1996). Candidates must have a fair and equal opportunity to participate (power neutrality) and should be given adequate time or opportunity to introduce themselves, garner support and communicate their abilities and character to voters (openness and transparency) (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003; Habermas, 1996). The voters should receive sufficient notice of the election to gather information and make informed, independent decisions (autonomy) (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003; Habermas, 1996). The election process must be fair, legitimate and conducted with integrity, including secret ballot voting to prevent undue influence or victimisation. Furthermore, partisan or self-serving interference, whether economic, political, cultural or administrative, must be avoided and prohibited. All participants, including voters, candidates and election officials, should be educated to base their decisions not on personal gain or purely selfish considerations, but on the best interest of the school community and its shared educational purpose (Eriksen & Weigard, 2003; Habermas, 1996).

Research Design and Methodology

In the research upon which this study is based we employed a non-experimental survey design. The target population in the education district, which comprised 47 secondary schools, 104 primary schools, and four combined schools ($n = 155$), was approximately 390 potential participants. The potential participant population in the target districts was made up of deputy principals, mentor educators and learner leaders. The number of deputy principals who were responsible for learner elections and leadership was 155 (one per school) and the educators that served as leader guardians ("mentors") in the target population were 205. Some of the larger schools had two educators that served in this capacity. Following a positivist

paradigm, we used electronic questionnaires in this quantitative study to collect data on factors influencing leader and RCL elections. Questionnaires were distributed via electronic mail (email) or Google Forms to selected respondents ($n = 94$) using convenience sampling.

At secondary schools, the following persons were invited to participate: one learner (who had attained age of majority (18 years old), i.e. adult status) serving on the RCL and the governing body, educators acting as RCL guardians and deputy-principals that were responsible for overseeing the RCL elections, as stipulated by the Personnel Administration Measures (DoE, RSA, 2001). At primary schools the leaders' educator guardians and deputy-principals were invited to participate. Learners in primary schools were not eligible for participation in the survey for ethical reasons, since they were underage, and parental consent could not be obtained for the participation of minor learners.

We used convenience sampling, a standard non-probability approach in quantitative education research when access to resources constrain probability sampling (see e.g. Ergene & Karabogaz, 2024:297–298). Participants were selected based on practical accessibility, experience and relevance (Creswell & Creswell, 2017). The *Sage Encyclopedia of Educational Research, Measurement, and Evaluation* (Frey, 2018) defines convenience sampling as a standard non-probability technique used in education research, noting use-cases and validity caveats. We acknowledge the limits on generalisability and the requirement to apply appropriate robustness checks with demographic comparisons. Independent schools as defined by section 1 and regulated in terms of Chapter 5 of the South African Schools Act (i.e. private schools), were excluded from the study. The research adhered to the ethical requirements approved by the university's ethics committee.

The Measuring Instrument: Development and Validation of the Questionnaire

Since no standardised instrument existed to assess the application of legal principles and democratic theory, a questionnaire was developed. The questionnaire comprised four sections:

- Section A – Biographical and demographic information of the respondent.
- Section B – Knowledge of legal determinants and understanding of democratic principles.
- Section C – The election process of leaders or RCL members.
- Section D – The scope and frequency of democratic practices during elections of leaders or RCL members.

The validation process included the following: (a) face validation by three subject specialists and the statistical consultant to identify common errors,

(b) content validation through a pilot study, (c) construct validation using statistical analysis to assess the suitability of data for factor analysis, and (d) internal consistency testing using Cronbach's alpha coefficient to evaluate inter-correlation of items and the consistency in the measurement. Cronbach's alpha values were as follows: Section B – 0.86 and 0.90; Section C – 0.65; and Section D – 0.76. These values were deemed reliable (Field, 2009). Additionally, the Kaiser-Meyer-Olkin (KMO) test yielded values of 0.88 for Section B, 0.58 for Section C and 0.76 for Section D, confirming the adequacy of the data for factor analysis. The final step in the validation process involved rectifying errors and formatting the final questionnaire in Google Forms.

Data Collection

Respondents received a link to Google Forms, which, when clicked, opened the questionnaire on their smartphone or personal computer. This allowed for seamless electronic completion and submission. Anonymity and confidentiality of all respondents were strictly maintained during this process. Upon data collection, the Google database automatically compiled responses into a spreadsheet for analysis.

Data Analysis

The Statistical Consulting Services of the North-West University (NWU) assisted with the data processing. Statistical analyses were conducted using the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (IBM Corp., 2017) and the Statistical Analysis System (SAS, 2016) software suite. During data capturing, numerical values were

assigned to each category and variable. The data analysis included descriptive statistics to show trends in the data, a comparative analysis, including *t*-tests and ANOVA, to examine differences between groups and relationships between variables, as well as effect size calculations (Cohen's *d*) to assess the magnitude of ordinal and nominal data across demographic sub-groups. The *p*-values obtained from *t*-tests for sub-groups were reported for completeness, acknowledging that no random sampling was employed. Due to space constraints and the need to maintain a focused and concise discussion, we do not elaborate here on all data presented in the tables.

Biographical and Demographical Statistics

The results in Table 1 (Item 1.5) indicate that more males than females participated in the survey, with males more frequently serving as educator guardians or deputy principals. Not all the biographical or demographical data from the study are contained in Table 1 as attention is directed primarily to the results of greatest interpretative value. The response rate and number of participating schools was somewhat disappointing (Item 1.2), likely due to the respondents' reluctance to complete electronic questionnaires. Although selected schools were visited and potential respondents were instructed on completing the questionnaire via their smartphones or computers, many still declined to participate. Common reasons included a lack of electronic devices or insufficient internet data. Data collection occurred during the last month of the school year, with most responses from primary school educators.

Table 1 Respondents' profiles

1.1 School and participant population in the target district	155 schools	390 participant population	
1.2 Number of schools that participated in the survey	74		
1.3 Number of respondents and questionnaires captured	94		
1.4 Number of deputy-principal respondents in primary and secondary schools	31 – Primary schools	19 – Secondary/ Combined schools	
1.5 Number of Educator guardian respondents (primary and secondary schools)	21 – Primary schools	15 – Secondary / Combined schools	
1.6 Profile of schools: primary / secondary school split	62% Primary <i>n</i> = 46	38% Secondary and combined schools <i>n</i> = 28	
1.7 Profile of respondents: male / female split	59%	41%	
1.8 Percentage of Black African respondents	27%		
1.9 Most prominent language of communication: Afrikaans	65%		
1.10 Most prominent African home language: Sesotho	25%		
1.11 Respondents' post level (PL)	Learner: 9%	PL2: 15%	PL3: 54%
1.12 Respondents' profile: Age % s	18 years (y): 9%	31–40 y: 20%	≥ 41 y: 64%
1.13 Educator respondents' experience: No. of years	0–5 y: 3%	11–15 y: 21%	≥ 16 y: 54%

Providing voters with sufficient information to make informed decisions is an essential component of a democratic process. However, according to Table 2 (Item 2.4), 56% of the

respondents reported that candidates were not afforded the opportunity to introduce themselves to the voters (learners) during the nomination process.

Table 2 Descriptive statistics of the election processes at schools

2.1 Notice of RCL elections –	No notice (0 days)	25%
Time to prepare for elections:	1 day notice	4%
	1 week notice	19%
	2 weeks' notice	25%
	1 month notice	27%
2.2 Nomination of candidates:	No nomination procedure	49%
	Official announcement event	15%
	During school hall assembly	28%
	Other (e.g. by circular/memo)	8%
2.3 Reasons for disqualification of candidates:	No disqualification	15%
	Serious misconduct	57%
	Age	23%
	Demerit points (ill-discipline)	5%
2.4 Opportunity to campaign / opportunity for	No opportunity to campaign	56%
candidates to introduce themselves /	1 scheduled day to campaign	23%
opportunity for voters to get information about	2 days to 1 week to campaign	14%
candidates:	2 weeks or more to campaign	7%

Only 28% of respondents (Item 2.2) indicated that candidates were allowed to present themselves during a school assembly. This suggests that learners had limited opportunities to campaign and gather support, ultimately depriving voters of their democratic right to make informed and autonomous decisions. Item 2.1 reveals that in 25% of cases learners and candidates received no prior notice, effectively making the election of leaders or RCL members a surprise. In 23% of cases (Item 2.1), learners had less than a week's notice to consider potential candidates.

Results: Knowledge of Democratic Principles and the Law regarding RCL Elections

Table 3 presents data on nine key questions assessing respondents' self-evaluative perception of

their knowledge of democracy and the legal framework governing the elections of leaders and RCL members. The average score was used as a benchmark to gauge respondents' perceived level of knowledge for each question. However, self-evaluation carries the inherent risk or pitfall of the so-called "halo effect", where individuals tend to overestimate their own abilities or knowledge. Evidence from the statistical analysis of data suggests that this bias was present in this study. While Table 3 presents the full set of data, the analysis is confined to findings of particular importance or relevance.

Table 3 Knowledge of democracy and law regarding elections (Questionnaire – Section B)

Question/Statement	Options	%	AVE	SD
3.1 The nomination process of leader elections/RCL elections	Limited	2.7	3.10	0.71
	Poor	12.0		
	Good	58.7		
	Excellent	26.7		
3.2 The democratic principle of the participation of all role players	Limited	0.0	3.19	0.64
	Poor	12.2		
	Good	55.4		
	Excellent	32.4		
3.3 The democratic principle of autonomous decision-making	Limited	2.7	2.97	0.71
	Poor	17.3		
	Good	58.7		
	Excellent	21.3		
3.4 The democratic principle of no undue influencing by someone in a position of authority	Limited	5.3	2.96	0.73
	Poor	12.0		
	Good	64.0		
	Excellent	18.7		
3.5 The democratic principle of the ideal nomination procedure	Limited	4.0	2.95	0.72
	Poor	16.0		
	Good	61.3		
	Excellent	18.7		
3.6 The leader/RCL election procedure	Limited	1.4	3.22	0.71
	Poor	12.2		
	Good	50.0		
	Excellent	36.5		
3.7 The provincial guidelines for RCL elections	Limited	13.3	2.59	0.86
	Poor	26.7		
	Good	49.3		
	Excellent	10.7		
3.8 The provisions of the SA Schools Act regarding RCL elections	Limited	9.3	2.66	0.85
	Poor	32.0		
	Good	44.0		
	Excellent	14.7		
3.9 The school policy regarding leader/RCL elections	Limited	9.3	2.95	0.90
	Poor	13.3		
	Good	50.7		
	Excellent	26.7		

The highest average (3.22) was recorded for Item 3.6 in Table 3, where 86.5% of the respondents rated their knowledge of the election procedure as good or excellent. The second highest score (3.19) was on Item 3.2, reflecting respondents' broad knowledge of understanding the democratic principle of role-player participation. Yet, despite these high self-assessments, contradictions emerge. For instance, in Item 3.7 (Table 3), 40% of the respondents rated their knowledge of provincial guidelines as poor or limited. Similarly, Item 3.8 shows that 41% admitted to having poor or limited knowledge of the South African Schools Act, while 23% acknowledged the same regarding school policies. The highest standard deviation (0.90) was observed in Item 3.9, indicating significant variation among respondents regarding their knowledge of school policies on leader or RCL elections.

Further inconsistencies arise when comparing Item 3.1 of Table 3 (knowledge about the nomination process of leader or RCL elections) with Table 2 (Items 2.2 and 2.4). While respondents claimed to have knowledge of the

nomination process for elections, 56% indicated that candidates were not given an opportunity to introduce themselves during nominations. Additionally, Items 3.7 and 3.8 in Table 3 report the lowest self-assessed knowledge scores – 2.59 for knowledge of provincial guidelines for RCL elections and 2.66 for Schools Act provisions.

These admissions, deviations and inconsistencies undermine the high self-rating in Item 3.6 (Table 3) revealing a tendency of respondents to overestimate their knowledge, while simultaneously acknowledging gaps in their understanding.

Opinions about the Democratic Features of the Election Process

The mean (average) serves as a benchmark for assessing the extent of respondents' agreement or disagreement. The questions in Table 4 were designed to evaluate the respondents' opinions regarding the principles of substantive democracy (as previously discussed), namely, ideal role-taking, power neutrality, openness and transparency, generality, independent autonomous

decision-making (voting) and a fair legitimate process.

Most respondents held that neither school principals (Item 4.1), not parents that serve on the school governing body, nor the RCL guardians (Item 4.4) should have casting votes. This affirms the principle of power neutrality as members of school management and governance should not have determinative voting power. Yet, the findings are somewhat disconcerting as approximately 48% (large minority) of the respondents favoured the

idea that a principal or RCL guardian should have a casting vote and thus only 52% supported the idea of one person one vote. However, in one instance, most respondents held that an educator's votes should carry double weight (Item 4.2, 53.3%), which is counter to the principle of power neutrality (all voters should have equal say). It may be that this outcome was influenced by the large proportion of primary school educators that participated in this survey.

Table 4 Opinions regarding the election procedure

Question/Statement	Options	%	AVE	SD
4.1 The school principal should have a casting vote regarding election of leaders	I don't agree	52.0	1.54	0.63
	I agree	40.0		
	I strongly agree	8.0		
4.2 A vote of an educator should weigh double regarding election of leaders	I don't agree	46.7	1.71	0.76
	I agree	33.3		
	I strongly agree	20.0		
4.3 Parent members of the school's governing body should have an influence on the election process	I don't agree	89.3	1.13	0.38
	I agree	9.3		
	I strongly agree	1.3		
4.4 The leader/RCL guardian (educator) should have a casting vote regarding election of leaders	I don't agree	52.0	1.51	0.58
	I agree	44.0		
	I strongly agree	4.0		
4.5 Specific grade learners should vote for that particular grade's leaders/RCL members	I don't agree	42.7	1.75	0.75
	I agree	38.7		
	I strongly agree	18.6		
4.6 All the learners of the school should vote for all the candidates	I don't agree	57.3	1.56	0.71
	I agree	30.7		
	I strongly agree	12.0		
4.7 Prospective candidates should undergo leadership training before the election process	I don't agree	22.7	2.15	0.78
	I agree	38.7		
	I strongly agree	38.7		
4.8 RCL members should be elected according to portfolios	I don't agree	32.0	1.85	0.71
	I agree	49.3		
	I strongly agree	18.7		
4.9 The school governing body's learner representatives should be elected by the final RCL.	I don't agree	21.9	2.10	0.73
	I agree	45.2		
	I strongly agree	32.9		
4.10 The learner representatives that serve on the governing body should be elected by secret ballot.	I don't agree	23.0	2.11	0.74
	I agree	44.6		
	I strongly agree	32.4		
4.11 Only existing class representatives should be elected to the leader group/RCL	I don't agree	69.3	1.41	0.67
	I agree	21.3		
	I strongly agree	9.3		
4.12 Votes must be counted by a predetermined election committee	I don't agree	10.7	2.28	0.65
	I agree	49.3		
	I strongly agree	40.0		

Table 4 (Item 4.7) indicates that almost 78% of respondents believed that prospective candidates should undergo leadership training before the election process. This strongly affirms the principle of ideal role-taking (voters should be educated). Most of the respondents, i.e. 57.3% (Items 4.5 and 4.6) were not in favour of all learners voting for all the candidates for RCL membership. Conversely, this means that the majority believed that learners of a particular grade should elect RCL leaders from their own grade. This is understandable as, in most cases, learners in junior grades do not know the candidates in higher grades and voters should in

principle vote only for candidates that they know. In a sense, these findings agree with the democratic principle of ideal-role taking as voters (learners of different grades) should know what and who they are voting for.

A strong majority of respondents (77%) (Item 4.7) asserted that all prospective candidates should undergo leadership training before the election process. Importantly, this affirms the principle of ideal role-taking and implicitly acknowledges that learners need training as they do not naturally know or automatically understand what leadership entails. A significant outcome is

that 68% of the respondents (Item 4.8) were in favour of the requirement that RCL members should be elected to specific portfolios. This agrees with the democratic principle of openness and transparency. However, this outcome differs from the usual practice at most schools where candidates are ordinarily simply elected from a list of names without being linked to a particular portfolio or function. This finding thus has important implications for the election process as it would require candidates to link their candidacy to a particular portfolio or portfolios. These announcements should be conducted in a fair and transparent manner, which implies that schools should have an election policy on campaigning by candidates that provides equitable opportunities for each candidate to be introduced during the preparatory phase of an RCL election.

A substantial majority of respondents (78%) believed that only elected RCL members should vote for leaders that would represent them on the school governing body (Item 4.9) and that this election should be by secret ballot (Item 4.10). This affirms the democratic principles of autonomy (independent decision-making) and generality (those that are affected should vote). Item 4.11 affirms that 69.3% of the respondents believed that RCL leaders should be elected from the entire body of learners and not merely from an existing

(pre-selected) group of class representatives. This affirms the principle of generality. The final question in Table 4 (Item 4.12) is uncontroversial as 89.3% of the respondents held that votes should be counted by a pre-determined election committee. This may stem from prior experiences of undue interference in the counting process, thus reinforcing the democratic need for election integrity, and a fair transparent process that is not subject to undue influence or ad hoc and arbitrary manipulation. To summarise, most of the findings affirm that most respondents agreed with or adhered to the principles of substantive democracy.

The Democratic Nature and Fairness of RCL Elections

In Table 5 the average serves as a guideline to indicate the frequency of occurrences. The discussion does not extend to every item of data presented in Table 5 but highlights the findings that are most significant for the objectives of the study. According to Item 5.5, most respondents believed that voters were free to make their own choices during RCL elections (Ave. 3.51). A positive finding (Table 5, Item 5.7) is that political affiliation rarely influenced leader or RCL elections, confirming compliance with section 33A of the Schools Act, which prohibits party-political activity in schools.

Table 5 The democratic nature and fairness of RCL elections (Questionnaire Section D)

Question/Statement	Frequency	%	AVE	SD
5.1 The leader/RCL nomination process takes place democratically	Almost never	5.3	3.26	0.93
	Seldom	14.7		
	Regularly	26.7		
	Always	53.3		
5.2 Leader/RCL elections take place democratically	Almost never	4.0	3.30	0.87
	Seldom	13.3		
	Regularly	29.3		
	Always	53.3		
5.3 The school's leader/RCL election policy is consulted before an election	Almost never	12.2	2.96	1.07
	Seldom	18.9		
	Regularly	25.7		
	Always	43.2		
5.4 All relevant stakeholders participate in the election process	Almost never	5.3	3.33	0.86
	Seldom	8.0		
	Regularly	32.0		
	Always	54.7		
5.5 Voters are allowed to make their own choice	Almost never	4.0	3.51	0.79
	Seldom	5.4		
	Regularly	25.3		
	Always	65.3		
5.6 Leader/RCL elections are influenced by the parents on the governing body	Almost never	78.7	1.33	0.74
	Seldom	14.7		
	Regularly	2.7		
	Always	4.0		
5.7 Leader/RCL candidates are elected according to party political affiliation	Almost never	90.5	1.14	0.52
	Seldom	5.4		
	Regularly	2.7		
	Always	1.4		
5.8 Prospective candidates get the opportunity to campaign or to provide information about themselves before the election	Almost never	49.3	1.91	1.10
	Seldom	17.3		
	Regularly	20.0		
	Always	13.3		
5.9 After the election, leaders/RCL members are used/engaged in specific portfolios	Almost never	20.3	2.69	1.10
	Seldom	20.3		
	Regularly	29.7		
	Always	29.7		
5.10 The school principal influences the learner council elections	Almost never	56.0	1.56	0.79
	Seldom	32.0		
	Regularly	8.0		
	Always	4.0		
5.11 Voter training takes place before the election process	Almost never	39.2	1.21	0.56
	Seldom	24.3		
	Regularly	23.0		
	Always	13.5		
5.12 Voting is done by secret ballot	Almost never	13.3	3.29	1.09
	Seldom	8.0		
	Regularly	18.7		
	Always	60.0		

Disturbing trends emerge when the percentages of undemocratic practices are considered. According to respondents, 20% of nomination processes (Item 5.1) and 17.3% of elections (Item 5.2) rarely or never occurred democratically. These findings suggest that almost one-fifth of these processes failed to uphold democratic principles.

According to Table 5, a substantial majority of respondents indicated that the nomination process (Item 5.1, 80%), elections (Item 5.2, 82.6%), voter participation (Item 5.4, 86.7%) and voting by secret ballot (voter autonomy) (Item 5.12, 78.7%) regularly or always occurred

democratically at the schools. However, 31.1% of the respondents (Item 5.3) admitted that school policies were rarely or seldom consulted. Furthermore, 63.5% of respondents (Item 5.11) indicated that voter training rarely or almost never took place before the election process. Two thirds of the respondents (66.6%) indicated that candidates seldomly or almost never had the opportunity to campaign and inform voters (Item 5.8). These findings are contrary to the democratic principle of ideal role-taking as voters enter the RCL elections unprepared for key aspects of a democratic election, including the nomination process and voting procedures. Without proper

voter training and information, elections risk becoming undemocratic. This is particularly important for primary school voters who generally lack awareness of leadership qualities and are uninformed about the electoral process. Ensuring voter autonomy requires that individuals make informed choices based on adequate preparation, proper guidance and fair processes (cf. Table 2; Item 2.4). The survey findings indicate that the principle of power neutrality is adhered to by and large as election outcomes are not influenced by parent members of the school governing body (Item 5.8), political party affiliation (Item 5.7) or school principals (Item 5.10). Most of the respondents (Item 5.9, 59.4%) indicated that RCL leaders were engaged in specific portfolios after being elected. The practice of involving RCL leaders in specific portfolios at schools is particularly important as it reinforces the value and usefulness of democratic elections and enables purposeful democratisation of the school environment.

Key Statistics: Results of the *t*-tests with Effect Sizes

To determine differences between independent demographic groups, e.g. male/female, and Afrikaans- or Sesotho-speaking educators, Cohen's effect sizes were used. While *p*-values from *t*-tests for independent groups were reported for completeness, interpretations were based on Cohen's effect sizes (*d*) due to the absence of random sampling. Using *t*-tests we examined differences based on gender, home language, school type and whether elected learner councillors should serve on the school governing body. Not all the data from the study are discussed in Tables 6, 7 and 8 – attention is primarily directed to the results of greatest significance and interpretative value.

The results in Table 6 indicate that female respondents were more likely than male respondents to believe that educators' voices should carry more weight during the voting process. A possible explanation for this is that female educator respondents were mostly responsible for teaching rather than management, particularly in primary schools.

Table 6 Statistically significant effect size between male and female educators

Item A2: Genders		<i>N</i>	Ave-dev	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>	Effect size
RCL election process	1 Male	56	1.74	0.52	0.942	0.01
	2 Female	38	1.73	0.37		

Table 7 (Item B – Knowledge of processes) reveals a significant effect size difference (0.84) between Afrikaans-speaking and Sesotho-speaking respondents regarding their perceived knowledge of electoral processes. Afrikaans-speaking respondents were more confident in their understanding of the procedures of leader or RCL elections than their Sesotho-speaking counterparts. Additionally, a large effect size difference (0.91)

was observed between these groups (Table 7, Item C) concerning the weight that educators' vote should carry in learner council elections. Afrikaans-speaking respondents favoured greater influence for educators in voting, whereas Sesotho-speaking respondents adopted a more *laissez faire* approach, allowing learners more autonomy in the election process.

Table 7 Large and medium differences in effect sizes

Item A3	Respondents' home language	<i>N</i>	Average deviation	<i>SD</i>	<i>ES</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>ES</i>
B Knowledge of processes	1 Afrikaans	60	3.24	0.53	0.07647	0.005	0.84
	4 Sesotho	24	2.75	0.58	0.14180		
C Educators – Language	1 Afrikaans	60	1.70	0.48	0.06969	0.001	0.91
	4 Sesotho	24	1.26	0.40	0.09699		
D Educators – schools	1 Primary school	59	1.72	0.56	0.08198	0.007	0.56
	2 Secondary school	25	1.41	0.41	0.07798		

Table 7 (Item D – Educators schools) shows a medium effect size difference (0.56) between primary and secondary school educators. Primary school educators were more likely to believe that their votes should carry greater weight in the election process than their secondary school counterparts. A possible explanation for this finding may stem from the perception of primary

school educators that younger learners are not yet capable of making informed decisions, thus requiring greater intervention by educators. While this perspective may have merit, the practice of unequal voting rights contradicts the democratic principle of generality and is inherently undemocratic. A more effective approach would be to strengthen voter education on leadership

qualities and the role of leaders or the RCL, thereby increasing confidence in the accuracy of voter's

choices and ensuring that each vote carries equal weight in a truly democratic process.

Table 8 ANOVA and effect sizes of educator post levels

						Effect sizes		
Item: Post levels (PL) and experience		<i>N</i>	Average deviation	<i>SD</i>	<i>p</i>	Learners	Post level 1	Post level 2
A - Democratic custom	Learners	10	2.83	0.50	0.178			
	PL 1	20	2.71	0.71		0.17		
	PL 2	14	3.11	0.51		0.57	0.57	
	PL 3	50	3.07	0.61		0.40	0.51	0.07
B - Influencing	Learners	10	1.76	0.72	0.108			
	PL 1	20	1.53	0.42		0.32		
	PL 2	14	1.46	0.28		0.41	0.15	
	PL 3	50	1.36	0.37		0.55	0.40	0.28

Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) Effect Sizes and Differences in Perceptions

The ANOVA effect sizes highlight differences in opinions between educators (categorised by PLs and years of experience) and learners. This discussion focusses on medium to large differences between these groups. The most significant disparities between educators and learners pertain to the application of democratic practices and the extent of voter influence.

Democratic Practices – Educators Vis-à-vis Learners – the Halo-effect

Table 8 (Item A – Democratic customs) reveals a significant difference (p -value = 0.178) between learners, who perceived the application of democratic practices in RCL elections as low, and PL 3 educators, who held a more favourable perception of these practices. A possible explanation for this result is that deputy-principals (PL 3 educators) who oversee the election process may be unaware of or perhaps indifferent to the undemocratic elements in leader or RCL elections. This reflects the halo effect in which individuals responsible for managing the process overestimate its fairness, while learners – who are directly affected by the leader or RCL elections – perceive them as less democratic.

Influencing During RCL Elections

Table 8 (Item B – Influencing) confirms a substantial difference (p -value = 0.108) between learners and educators regarding perceptions of voter influence. Learners strongly believed that undue influence occurred during leader or RCL elections, whereas educators generally denied this. This discrepancy may stem from the fact that deputy principals assumed that leader or RCL elections were conducted in line with policies and legislation, while learners' responses reflected their lived experiences, suggesting otherwise.

Synopsis: The Key Findings of this Study

The following findings summarise the most significant results of this study. We determined that only selected learner groups participated in leader or RCL election processes and enjoyed voting rights. Most of the respondents indicated that voters did not receive adequate notice prior to elections. In most cases, candidates were not afforded an opportunity to introduce themselves during a nomination process or to campaign for support. Two thirds of the respondents reported that no voter training occurred before the election process. Half of the respondents stated that elected RCL members were rarely assigned to specific portfolios following the elections. Nearly half of the respondents believed that the school principal, the leaders or RCL guardians, and educators should have either a deciding or a majority vote in the election process. Most respondents demonstrated limited or no knowledge of the provincial election guidelines, the Schools Act or school policy provisions regarding elections. Secondary school learners were particularly convinced that undue influence occurred during the RCL election process.

Recommendations for Improving School Leader Elections and Leadership Development

Currently, provincial guidelines and school policies do not adequately provide for fair notice periods, pre-election voter education, leadership training, or a clear articulation of democratic principles underpinning voting rights and election procedures. We recommend that learners and educators undergo comprehensive training on democratic principles and leadership characteristics before the election process. This training should include instruction on defining leadership, identifying leaders, types of leaders, the roles and responsibilities of leaders, as well as key democratic and election procedures, such as the

nomination process, campaigning, ballot paper management, and voting protocols.

Therefore, we recommend that the national and provincial departments of basic education should collaborate to develop improved guidelines for RCL elections for secondary schools as well as guidelines for elections of primary school leaders.

Campaigning Procedures and Voter Awareness

The revised election guidelines should incorporate structured campaigning procedures, as these help candidates plan, focus and clearly articulate their intentions. Campaigning also provides voters with essential information about candidates, enabling them to make informed decisions. Suggested guidelines and school policies should specify the duration of the campaigning period, time of the year, campaigning rules, the disclosure of each candidate's basic biography, endorsements, leadership qualities, general vision, and specific portfolio aspirations, allowing for regulated, structured campaigning according to acceptable rules of conduct to comply with the democratic principle of openness and transparency.

Implementation of a Portfolio System for RCL Members

Beyond their general duties, we recommend that leaders or RCL members should be assigned responsibilities through designated portfolios or sub-committees. A portfolio system offers several advantages, including that it structures leader or RCL activities into clearly defined, planned functions; all leaders or RCL members gain experience in multiple facets of leadership, planning, organisation and execution of tasks; senior leaders can mentor novice leaders or RCL members, fostering leadership development; responsibilities can be distributed and shared more equitably, and promoting teamwork and cooperation. Table 9 outlines suggested portfolios and their respective functions within RCL sub-committees.

The application of the portfolio system could serve as a mechanism for leadership training and development in keeping with Dewey's (1938) educational method of experiential learning.

Table 9 Proposed draft layout of functions for RCL portfolios

Specific portfolio	Suggested activities, functions and duties
Academic	Service regarding olympiads and expos, excursions, information days, career guidance, competitions, bursary functions and recognition events, liaison with the SGB's academic committee, universities
Sport	Service during house and inter-school sporting events, liaison with sport committees and coaches, leadership in sport, arranging motivational speakers, service during recognition events
Culture	Service during cultural events such as musicals, dramas, dances, debates, public speaking, commemoration days, services regarding audio, lighting and décor, recognition functions, liaison with cultural organisations
Internal relations/Social	Service regarding social events e.g. Matric farewell, Valentine's ball, school competitions, team building, scholarships, and excursions
External relations/Liaison	Service regarding open days, contributing or involvement with marketing and publicity, liaison with the SGB's marketing committee, the school's media officer
Community service and religion	Scheduled opening addresses and speakers, organising speaking events, awareness campaigns, Y-cap projects, liaison with community organisations

Learner Participation in Elections – Age-appropriate Inclusion

It is important to acknowledge that learners in the Foundation Phase (Grades 1–3) lack the developmental readiness to take an active role in school leadership elections. At this young age children are still developing the foundational cognitive, emotional, and social skills. Their ability to understand the implications of their choices and critical evaluation of leadership traits is limited. Furthermore, young learners are highly impressionable and vulnerable to outside influences, making it difficult to ensure a free and equitable decision-making process. For these reasons, we suggest that it is not developmentally appropriate to include young learners in leadership elections.

On the other hand, learners in Grades 4 and higher, have a higher degree of emotional maturity,

reasoning ability, and awareness of their school environment. They are more able to understand the roles and responsibilities of elected leaders, and therefore, they should be given the right to vote in leader or representative elections.

Conclusion

By investing in such holistic leadership development and strengthening the frameworks that support it, schools may ensure that both the election process and the roles that follow become more credible, participatory and enriching. Future democratic leaders are likely to emerge from learners who are elected to serve as leaders or RCL members in schools. This approach will empower school leaders and encourage learners to take active roles in school life, ultimately nurturing a culture of democratic citizenship.

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Authors' Contributions

MHS wrote the manuscript, AMB conducted the research, provided and analysed the data. The Statistical Consultancy Services (S Ellis) of the NWU conducted all statistical analyses.

Notes

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