

**STIMULATING NAMIBIAN LEARNERS' DEMOCRATIC PARTICIPATION AND
LEADERSHIP IN A SENIOR PRIMARY RURAL SCHOOL: A PARTICIPATORY
ACTION RESEARCH STUDY**

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Educational Leadership and Management (ELM)

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By

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Declaration of Originality

I, **Trofinus S. Kaongo**, hereby declare that this thesis is my work in my own words and it has not been submitted for any degree in any other university. Where I have drawn on the words and ideas of others, these have been acknowledged by using references according to the Rhodes University Education Department Guide of referencing.



Signature

19 November 2024

Date

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Abstract

This study investigates the democratic participation and leadership opportunities of primary school learners within the Namibian education system, as outlined in the Basic Education Act. 3 of 2020. While the Act emphasises the involvement of secondary school learners in decision making, primary school learners are largely overlooked. Despite policies recognising children as democratic participants in education, implementation remains inconsistent, with secondary school learners often restricted to tokenistic leadership roles. To address this imbalance, the study explores leadership opportunities for primary school learners, seeking to understand the underlying factors contributing to the gap in democratic leadership at the primary school level.

Grounded in a critical paradigm, this qualitative research draws upon Kurt Lewin's field theory and theory of change, using participatory action research (PAR) to promote transformation. The research followed a two-phase design. In phase 1, data was collected through individual interviews with teachers and focus group discussions with learners. Phase 2 adopted PAR to assess how engaging learners in the research process stimulated democratic participation and leadership development. Data were gathered through reflective journals maintained by both the learners and the researcher.

Abductive analysis of the data, informed by Lewin's theoretical framework, the Lundy model of participation, Hart's ladder of participation and leadership theory, revealed varying understandings of democratic participation among participants. For many, it was equated with learners' freedom of expression, collective decision making and leadership autonomy. However, while learners were afforded opportunities to lead school-initiated activities such as cleaning campaigns, sports events and class monitoring, their involvement in the initiation of these activities remained limited. The study found that learner leadership could be significantly enhanced through greater involvement in collective decision making, motivation and recognition by teachers, and increased leadership autonomy. Nonetheless, barriers such as age differences, peer pressure, limited time and teachers' negative attitudes impeded the realisation of these objectives.

The study contributes significant insights into learner leadership in Africa, particularly in the under-researched context of senior primary school leadership. It highlights the need for greater equity in leadership opportunities between primary and secondary learners and advocates a transformative school environment that fosters multiple leadership pathways based on individual cognitive development.

Keywords: Democratic participation, leadership, learner leadership, learner voice, participatory action research.

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List of Acronyms

AR	-	Action Research
ELM	-	Educational Leadership and Management
CRC	-	Children Rights Convention
LRC	-	Learner Representative Council
PAR	-	Participatory Action Research
UNCRC	-	United Nation Children Rights Convention
UNIC	-	United Nations International Convention

CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION AND ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

As a school principal, I see myself as the captain navigating the ship towards effective school leadership and successful outcomes (Memela & Ramrathan, 2022). I am privileged to undertake this study to deepen my understanding of school leadership and management. Effective school leadership is fundamental to achieving common educational goals and is built on shared power relations among all stakeholders (Ramrathan, 2017). Given that learners are major stakeholders in schools' composition (Grant, 2015; Mncube, 2012; Nthontho, 2017a), this study aimed to explore perspectives on learner democratic leadership in schools and assess the prevalence of learner leadership in senior primary schools.

This chapter begins with the background and context of the study, followed by the research goals and questions. It then discusses the rationale and problem statement of the study. Finally, it outlines the methodology used and concludes with the thesis outline.

1.2 Background and Scope of Study

This section illuminates the importance of educational leadership and management (ELM) as a field of study in Africa, while also exploring the concept of learner democratic leadership in Namibia. Through a detailed study background, it aims to provide readers with a holistic understanding of ELM's status in Africa and a particular focus on learner leadership in Namibia.

1.2.1 Education Leadership and Management as a field of study

The field of educational leadership appears to receive limited attention in many Namibian schools, and perhaps in other regions globally. Hallinger (2018) observes that in the past, leadership initiatives were rarely spoken about and overlooked in many African societies. He further states that in current ELM research, "Literature is dominated by studies from Western

developed societies and it is of both practical and theoretical benefit to understand current ELM trends in other societies around the world” (Hallinger, 2018, p. 363). This observation implies that further research is needed on ELM to understand what causes it to move at a snail’s pace in Africa and other parts of the world – perhaps leadership is not well conceptualised in African countries. As Dowling (2017) posits, leadership is linked to democracy and social justice, where “democracy enjoys a privileged position in western society” (p. 11). According to Cam et al. (2022), democracy is “the implementation of choice and control for students to be able to guide their own educational plans and goals” (p. 442). As part of democracy, democratic participation is a top agenda on the African continent, where young learners are viewed as the key agents in the school structure (Grant & Kajee, 2023). Young learners are prominently recognised in the school's decision-making processes and affording them such opportunities will drastically transform the school into further achievements. Even though learners are seen as key agents in the school structure they are not practically recognised enough regarding their involvement in daily school operations. Bush and Glover (2021) contextualise the South African perspective and note that learners are less regarded when it comes to participating in school governance, which is in opposition to the opportunities for democratic participation that are advocated by national frameworks (Mabovula, 2009; Mncube, 2008). This notion is equally acknowledged by Calciano (1992), who refers to the Children's Rights Convention (CRC) and asserts that “children traditionally have had narrower legal rights than adults ... including democratic governments, do not have enough laws to protect children” (p. 517). In the same manner, Harcourt and Hägglund (2013), alluding to the CRC, maintain that “despite efforts in some sectors to implement Article 12, participation by children is limited in practice and particularly so for young children” (p. 288). In summary, the literature acknowledges the promotion of learner engagement in school leadership; however, policies are not fully implemented as directed by both the CRC and national frameworks and the situation worsens as schools continue to neglect their implementation.

Considering these perspectives, I was motivated to conduct research in the field of ELM, specifically focusing on leadership development among learners. Given the emphasis on democratic participation in my study to cultivate learner leadership, it was crucial to contextualise the study within the framework of democracy. To provide a foundation for my study, I now focus on how learner democratic leadership is perceived in the Namibian context.

1.2.2 Learner democratic leadership in the Namibian context

Before Namibia's independence in 1990, most learners did not have access to education in their preferred schools because the education system of that time was segregated. Many Namibian students went through difficult circumstances including experiencing oppression and unjust practices against humanity during the apartheid era (Amukugo, 1993). Learners were offered fewer opportunities to express their views on their learning processes. Even if they had a few democratic participation opportunities, their views were rarely considered. Sharing a similar notion, Lilemba (2017) expresses that in the Namibian context "teachers and parents impose their wills on learners which is not purely democratic" (p. 105). Both South Africa and Namibia explicitly articulate the democratic participation of learners in school leadership in their educational policies but give it minimal attention (Grant & Kajee, 2023). In summary, learner leadership in most schools is not fully exercised, and learners are denied democratic participation in their schools compared to other stakeholders.

In 1990, Namibia became an independent state, and a new constitution was established. Thereafter, Namibia became a member state of the United Nations International Convention (UNIC), and then adopted the *World Declaration on Education for All* (UNESCO, 1990). The main goal of the convention was to promote democracy in the education system of the member states. According to *Towards Education for All* (MBEC, 1993), in the context of democracy, such an education system should promote the participation of everyone with an interest in education during decision-making. Similarly, the United Nations Child Rights Convention (UNCRC) (UN, 1990) views democracy as "when stakeholders interact as co-learners and leaders, and where children are encouraged to speak about their education" (p. 4). To address that, Article 20 of the Namibian Constitution through the Basic Education Act. 3 of 2020 implemented and legislated that every state school, both secondary and primary, must establish a body of learners to represent them in the school governing structure as the Learners' Representative Council (LRC) or prefects following the prescribed guidelines of such a council (MoE, 2020). Equally, the Act suggests that schools designated as resource schools may be exempted from such compliance if the executive director is satisfied with the proposal (MoE, 2020). It seems that the inclusion of learners in school governance is a matter of discretion. Nonetheless, it is clear that democracy and learner participation are prominent topics in post-1990 literature.

Besides, my reading of the Act suggests that the work of LRCs in secondary schools is not sufficiently detailed, and no further discussion about opportunities for leadership of learners in primary schools exists. In the Namibian context, a senior primary learner's age ranges from 10–15, while the secondary level is 16–18 years. With my professional experience of two decades, I observed that the subject of prefects in primary school leadership is taken lightly and only a few schools implement this system compared to secondary schools. Even though learners are considered a part of the school composition, their voices are rarely heard in matters concerning their schooling (Grant & Kajee, 2023; Mabovula, 2009). In essence, learners are ignored both by policymakers and adults concerning democratic participation based on the arguments made earlier. Therefore, it can be concluded that a disparity in leadership development exists between senior primary and secondary school learners. This underscores the necessity to concentrate on leadership within the senior primary phase, a relatively under-researched area. My attention now turns to justifying the need for my research focus.

1.3 Significance and Rationale of the Study

A school is an institution where every stakeholder is expected to contribute towards the school programmes through free participation (Guzman, 2022). A stakeholder is an individual or group “who has a long-term vested interest in the success of the school and the students” (Pascual, 2023, p. 28), including administrators, teachers, staff members, students, parents and others. Being a participant in a decision-making process as part of democratic participation promotes a feeling of connection and involvement in a particular situation through the planning and implementation of these decisions (Bergmark & Westman, 2018). This study is profoundly important considering the legitimation of learner leadership in international, regional and local contexts. Hence, I discuss the rationale for the topic based on three aspects: professional experiences, academic experiences and personal experiences.

1.3.1 Academic experience

Several scholars expressed that learner participation in school reform is limited. It is not only experienced on school grounds but also in research studies. A relative number of academics appeared to focus on secondary learners rather than primary learners when it came to leadership development. Notably, there is limited academic research on senior primary learners, hence, more studies are required to overcome the perceptions of senior primary learners who are seemingly incapable of handling leadership roles. In essence, learner leadership is relatively

influenced by the traditional bureaucratic model of leadership in society where older learners are given more preferences than younger ones. Subsequently, younger learners are seemingly sidelined by staff members in several aspects, in particular, school decision making (Holquist et al., 2023; Nthontho, 2017a). Despite learners being stakeholders in schools, many of them are still denied their right to express themselves (Kayumbu, 2017). Having denied learners the opportunity to express their views at tender age, Grant (2015) concludes that “schools tend to teach learners to be passive participants of democracy rather than leaders” (p. 95), which potentially “diminish learner leadership in schools” (Shikalepo & Kandjengo, 2021, p. 43).

To sum up, learner leadership enactment is taken lightly and under-researched in Namibia’s schools (Amadhila, 2018; Haipa, 2018), this calls for more research to be undertaken. Academically, it enriches the society as follows:

- It encourages more academic research about leadership in primary learners.
- It addresses the gap between primary learners and secondary learners in terms of leadership opportunities.
- It (study) might serve as a useful tool for organisational change in other schools that strive towards learner leadership emancipation.
- It serves as a footstep to academics by providing advanced situations on the theories used (Kurt Lewin Theory) for further development.

1.3.2 Professional experience

To embark on the study, I hoped it would bring me closer to a better understanding of learner leadership in the school context. Based on the observations I have made over many years of my teaching career, I found that parents and teachers are the ones who spearhead the decision-making process on school matters with little authentic involvement of learners. Having served at two different combined schools as a teacher, I learned that teachers usually focus on older learners when delegating responsibilities, with little consideration of the younger learners from the primary phase. For example, they likely used grade 10 learners to supervise grade 7 learners, whereas grade 7 learners never supervised grade 6 classes or below. My observation confirms Singh and Lokotsch’s (2005) feelings when they indicated that “it is these expressed concerns in the leadership of schools that brings one to question how far leadership in primary schools has moved away from the traditional bureaucratic model of leadership to more

transformational leadership style characterised by participatory decision-making” (p. 280). In essence, learner leadership is relatively focused on older learners than younger ones, which is influenced by society's traditional bureaucratic model of leadership. Therefore, I align my sentiment with Nthontho (2017a), who argues that “when children experience decision making as early as at primary school, chances are high that they become better decision-makers and problem solvers later in life” (p. 5). This stimulates my interest to engage in this study in order to justify my assumptions that younger learners are also capable of leading when offered holistic guidance from their teachers. Therefore, I felt it is important that the study does the following:

- The study informs the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture about the current situation concerning the implementation of the Basic Education Act. 3 of 2020, which regulates learner participation in school leadership.
- The study reveals the potential setbacks in the ministry’s framework, which advocates democratic learner participation and re-strategises it.

1.3.3 Personal experience

By overseeing the classroom environment for decades as a learner and later as an educator, I experienced that learners are being constrained from leadership initiatives in general. Personally, I feel the perception of children or young learners that they are not capable of leading is grounded in society traditions which might be transferred to schools. On many occasions, older children are likely to be in charge of guiding others whenever carrying out responsibility, be it at home or school. Culturally, leadership is seemingly predetermined by age rather than individual capability. Since educators are raised in this society, they might replicate these practices at schools. Having taught in both primary and secondary phases, I observed a disparity regarding the treatment given to primary and secondary learners in terms of learner participation in leadership. This study would enrich me and the school as follows:

- It will initiate changes that empower learners in the lower grades who will turn into great leaders in the future.
- It will promote active participation among the learners to produce multiple leaders in our school.
- It will afford learners a voice which might improve the teaching process through reflection on the school's progress.

Given the insights from the preceding discussion, I believe that further research is necessary to deepen our understanding of learner leadership contexts. Therefore, the following section will delve into a discussion of research goals and questions.

1.4 Research Goals and Questions

This qualitative study was initiated to stimulate democratic participation and enhance leadership development in senior primary learners using participatory action research (PAR) at a rural school in the Omusati Region. Hence, the following are the goals of my research:

- To better understand how the notion of learner democratic participation is perceived within the school.
- To establish the activities learners could lead or are involved in at the school.
- To engage in PAR to surface the factors that may enable or constrain leadership development in learners and to stimulate the development of leadership among primary school learners.

To meet these goals, the overall research question is as follows: *"How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?"*

To address this overall research question, the sub-questions have been separated into two phases:

Phase One

1. How is the notion of learner democratic participation perceived within the school?
2. What activities do learners lead at the school?
3. What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?

Phase Two

4. How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

1.5 Conceptual and Theoretical Underpinnings

This study focused on learner leadership – a subset of democratic leadership mostly intended to be practised in a formal school structure. The study was underpinned by a theoretical view of democratic leadership through learner democratic participation to invoke learner leadership development. The intention for undertaking the study was to seek organisational change, hence, a PAR (a subset of AR) was employed to bring such changes (Burnes, 2020). Previous literature discusses the prevalence of democratic participation in schools from the work of various scholars and academics, which were used to interpret the theoretical frameworks. The findings were analysed through the theoretical ideology of Kurt Lewin's field theory and change theory. The theory is embraced by group dynamics and AR, where the concepts of the three-step change model were used to guide the PAR processes. It was further guided by Lundy's work which focuses on the four principles (space, voice, audience and influence) of children's participation following Hart's (1992) levels of children's participation.

1.6 Research Methodology

This section explains the methods used for undertaking the study. The study was situated in a critical paradigm which “motivates researchers and participants to reflect on their experiences, in order to transform their situations” (Khoza & Biyela, 2020, p. 2670). It seeks to explore and bring changes to the case under study. This section outlines the methods employed in the study. Grounded in a critical paradigm, the research aimed to address the case under investigation. It was a qualitative study which sought to understand the stimulation of democratic participation among learners to develop leadership. The study further employed action research (AR) using PAR through the administration of five workshop sessions informed by O'Leary's (2004) cycle of research.

The study took place at a rural primary school in the Omusati Region of northern Namibia where I serve as the school principal. As an insider, I strategically positioned myself to mitigate potential bias in the study (Holmes, 2020). This involved navigating the ethical considerations that distinguished my role from the formal image learners held of me. To ensure ethical

conduct, a critical friend was appointed to oversee my actions and intervene if any ethical principles were at risk of being compromised.

The study used data generation methods aligned with its nature. Fifteen learner participants were divided into three groups, each comprising five members, alongside three senior primary teachers. Various methods were employed, including individual interviews with teachers, focus group interviews with learners and reflective journals kept by the learners and myself.

In the data analysis phase, the data from phase one, which focused on 'profile contextualisation' underwent inductive analysis. This involved generating themes from participants' responses through coding and categorising based on their commonalities. Subsequently, in phase two, 'PAR' abductive analysis was employed. This entailed generating theoretical themes/concepts from Kurt Lewin's (1934) Theory, the Lundy model (2007) of participation, and Hart's (1992) levels of participation as well as new themes derived from participants' responses.

Lastly, the study is legitimated by the ethics approval by the Higher Degree Ethics Committee after which I was granted gatekeepers' permission, such as approval letters from the school board chairperson and Omusati education director. Signed consent letters by parents, permission forms signed by teacher participants and assent letters from learners were collected and documented. This brings me to the last section of the chapter where I outline the chapters forming the thesis.

1.7 Outline of the Thesis Chapters

This section offers readers an overview of the content covered in all five chapters of this thesis. They are described as follows.

Chapter One served as the introductory chapter of the thesis, offering a concise overview of its contents. It commenced with an exploration of the background and scope of the study, followed by a delineation of the research goals and questions. In addition, it presented a succinct purpose statement, elucidated the foundational concepts and theoretical frameworks underpinning the study, and provided an overview of the methodology employed. Finally, it outlined the structure of the thesis, offering readers a roadmap for the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Two provides a review of the existing knowledge or 'literature' in the field of leadership, specifically on learner leadership. It discusses the scholarly literature on the

fundamental concepts on which the study was built, such as learner leadership, learner democratic participation and PAR. Furthermore, it shares the conceptual and theoretical frameworks of the study.

Chapter Three sheds light on the methods used in conducting the study. It starts with the processes of research design and paradigm, sampling methods of participants and the data-gathering methods employed. It presents my position as a researcher in the study before explaining how data were analysed (inductive and abductive), using a thematic analysis approach. Thereafter, it discusses the ethical principles that were complied with so that this study meets the credibility and trustworthiness criteria.

Chapter Four reveals the true picture of the situation – ‘the findings’ derived from the four predetermined research questions. It highlights the codes and profiles used to label the research participants to maintain anonymity and confidentiality. It discusses the understanding of learner democratic participation by participants, activities led by learners at schools, and enabling and constraining factors regarding learner leadership development. Finally, it concludes with a lengthy discussion on the PAR process guided by Kurt Lewin's three-step change model, Lundy's (2007) model of participation and Hart's (1992) level of participation.

Chapter Five offers a concise summary of the findings, followed by an exploration of the study's limitations. It then delves into the leadership knowledge contributed by the research and reflects on personal growth within the field. The chapter concludes with insights gained from the research study and their application to my life journey.

My study does not hang in a vacuum; hence, it is grounded on previous literature which I am going to discuss in the next chapter.

CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORKS

2.1 Introduction

The literature review is a profound section in academic writing that sets the foundation of existing knowledge on which students who intend to undertake research studies will construct new knowledge. It is an “overview of scholarly research in a specific field ... which connects the readers to key areas of existing knowledge, thereby helping them to understand the key concepts in that study” (Lim et al., 2022, p. 484). In addition, Rewhorn (2018) explains the literature review as a collection of previous knowledge in particular areas of study that is used by students to analyse, critique and identify knowledge gaps that may require further research.

Taking these definitions into consideration, I found literature to be an important component that informed my study, which focuses on the stimulation of democratic participation and leadership development in senior primary school learners. This section discusses the literature on the meaning of the concepts, learner leadership and learner voice. It further discusses the emancipation of democracy and participation among primary school learners and explores the challenges and successes of democratic learner participation. It assesses the influence that PAR process has on learner democratic participation which results in learner leadership development. Lastly, it covers the theoretical underpinning of the study by Kurt Lewin’s field theory, especially the three-step model of change that will guide the conducting of the PAR process.

2.2 Clarification of key concepts

2.2.1 Towards an understanding of learner leadership

Leadership is a critical factor that drives an organisation towards achieving its objectives through the dedicated efforts of its stakeholders, including learners. Speaking in this vein, “The school as an organization operates through the concerted efforts and functions of its stakeholders” (Pascual, 2023, p. 26). In the same voice, Nandasinghe (2020) asserts that “in

general, effective leadership is assumed to be the key to successful change” (p. 28). Leadership is not confined to a sole stakeholder in the school context, but it is diversified to teachers, parents and others, such as the school board, and learners, practically, through the LRCs in most secondary schools. Thus, for the learners taking part in school leadership, a concept of learner leadership has evolved, which is a subset concept of school leadership.

Most researchers define learner leadership from their own perceptions; however, the majority emphasise learners’ involvement in school matters and their ability to express their views on these issues. While Kalimbo (2018) indicates that “there is no concise definition of the concept of learner leadership” (p. 16), Shipopyeni (2019) understands learner leadership as “learners who are in charge of creating a suitable learning environment for themselves and participate in decision-making processes regarding their schooling” (p. 18). In essence, learners are expected to take charge of what they feel and want to see happening in the school administration rather than being ordered by teachers to do even the simple things surrounding their schooling. Shikalepo and Kandjengo (2020b) describe learner leadership as “having certain abilities to influence, innovate and motivate other learners” (p. 44). In comparison, Wajdi (2017, p. 77) describes it as “the process of influencing a group of individuals to obtain a common goal; and to develop a vision”.

It appears that the debate on learner participation is a controversial topic regarding the kinds of matters that learners may discuss with parents. Learners are expected to participate fully in school matters even though they will not make their final decisions ahead of their adults’ views. In relation to that, Jansen et al. (2014) describe learner leadership as an initiative that allows learners to develop into active leaders who make meaningful contributions to the school’s core function. Alluding to Jansen’s sentiment, Grant (2015) expresses that learner leadership is framed by ‘learner voice’ where learners’ ideas and their involvement matter in school reforms. This is to say, learners should be given a chance to share their views through developing their ‘voice’ and be empowered to make meaningful decisions for which they will be accountable.

Relating to this study, learners were offered the opportunities (learner voice) to express their feelings through PAR workshop sessions in order to develop leadership skills, which eventually led to learner leadership development. Mitra and Gross (2009) and Grant (2015) agree that the realisation of learners’ leadership is influenced by the effectiveness of learner voice in schools.

My attention now turns to unfolding the concept of learner voice, a foundation of learner leadership.

2.2.2 Defining learner voice

The concepts ‘children’ and ‘learners’ are used interchangeably when they are referred to as school-going children who attend formal education. Most literature expresses that children’s voice and learner voice are synonymous. Providing a distinction, Mangiaracina et al. (2021) describe ‘children’ as young people in formal education, whereas learners are children who make changes in their education and are prepared to express their views in democratic life. Referring to Mangiaracina et al.’s (2021) distinction, I considered children’s voice, student voice and learner voice as similar concepts; however, I preferred to use learner voice in my thesis.

Generally, a ‘voice’ is an expression of what a person wants to communicate to another person. Writing in an African schooling context, Grant and Kajee (2019) understand learner voice as “[the] opportunities that learners have to speak about what matters to them in schools and the degree to which they are engaged in school level decision making processes” (p. 90). Similarly, Mitra and Gross (2009) express that learner voice “is a representation of [the] various ways in which young people have opportunities to share in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers” (p. 523). According to Després and Dube (2020), learner voice is “the process by which learners are listened to, consulted, included, take part, or take charge of the decision-making process or take action about their learning or their education in diverse contexts” (p. 3). This means that learner voice is simply an opportunity afforded to learners to express their views in any situation that benefits them in their school livelihood. Therefore, it is “the practice of involving youth in decision-making within schools” (Holquist et al., 2023, p. 707).

Finally, Lundy (2018) understands learner voice as providing opportunities to learners through space, voice and audience, as well as influence in matters surrounding their lives. In essence, the promotion of the learner’s voice helps to prepare them for leadership through democratic participation in schools. The next discussion pays attention to democracy in education and learner democratic participation in schools to emancipate learner leadership development.

2.2.3 Democracy and learner democratic participation

2.2.3.1 Democracy

In the school context, democracy is referred to as participation that promotes the freedom and active involvement of everyone in matters that pertain to school operations. For Woods (2019), democracy seeks to enhance the involvement and influence of others in decisions, encourage discussion and debate, and create a sense of identity” (p. 6). Thus, democracy is founded on shared views through various approaches that intend to promote freedom for human beings (Kasimi, 2020). Equally, Burnes and Bargal (2017) express that democracy requires group views through the collective participation of all members for the common interest rather than individual interest. By giving a voice to every learner in the school, regardless of their cognitive development, socioeconomic status or ethnicity, only then can we talk about true democracy. In terms of inclusivity, Akudo (2020) defines it as when a leader “encourages people’s participation in policy formulation and implementation in the school” (p. 297).

People who are involved in any school are capable of contributing their views about what they want to see happening in their schools. Thus, for Barthold et al. (2020), “Democracy is based on the fact that leadership is deployed on a strictly egalitarian mode without distinction between leaders and followers” (p. 10). Affording learners a voice is a meaningful part of shared effort in school reform and is a manifestation of distributed leadership through democracy. This implies that every stakeholder in the school set-up is crucial, and the sharing of views is encouraged through active dialogue among members of different levels, including children. In reiteration, Canatan et al. (2023) describe democratic leadership as leaders who believe in the views of their followers and make them part of the decision-making processes and planning teams.

In the context of my study, this could translate into having primary school learners become initiators of ideas and leading activities in the school programme, this would demonstrate a sign of true democracy. Therefore, democracy advocates that every member should hold equal power in society, and those with formal positions in the hierarchy of leadership are expected to listen to them. This practice will eventually lead to democratic participation.

2.2.3.2 Learner democratic participation

Participation is the process of taking part in a certain situation through active engagement rather than listening (Duramy & Gal, 2020). In this regard, Bergmark and Westman (2018) explain participation as feelings of being connected and involved in a particular situation regarding planning, implementation and assessment in society. In the same vein, Hart (1992) expresses that participation refers to the process of “sharing decisions that affect one’s life and the life of the community in which one lives. It is how a democracy is built” (p. 5). In addition, the UNCRC (UN, 1990) explains participation as “having their [learner] voice heard when the decision that affects their lives are made, being actively involved in decision-making” (p. 4). Arguably, “Schools can further promote student leadership and influence by supporting students to lead at the institutional level” (Capretta et al., 2024, p. 24).

In essence, children need guidance from adults to make informed decisions, especially on sensitive issues. On this view, Hart (1992) introduces the notion of degrees of participation and proposes that participation stimulates the dialogue on where children need to be assisted by adults in making decisions. According to Mitra (2015), adult-child dialogue is defined as “creating spaces for young people to process and debrief their experiences” (p. 244). The degrees of participation indicate that children are expected to participate with the assistance of the adults, hence, there is no point in them being excluded from the adults’ discussions. However, Fielding (2001) urges that “participation means more than taking part in an activity organized by adults” (p. 12); therefore, adults should guide rather than assist learners.

Furthermore, Duramy and Gal (2020), quoting from the CRC, describe participation as “ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes” (p. 2). This means learners are expected to initiate ideas and, when decisions are taken, should be the ones to lead such initiatives with the inclusion of their teachers when required. Lastly, Nthontho (2017b) refers to student participation as “a process rather than an event, with varying degrees of involvement from being consulted on predetermined issues to them choosing their agenda, making their own decisions and taking them forward” (p. 166). In fact, learners should be viewed as important participants in school decision-making processes and should be empowered to take action in matters regarding their schools.

2.2.4 Relationship between learner voice and learner democratic participation

The free participation of learners is a vital tool in the pursuit of democracy and emancipation in school society. Learners' views would not be known in the school framework if their voices were not heard, and wherever there is a voice, there is also participation (Mitra, 2018). In essence, the prevalence of learner participation is an outcome of learner voice; these concepts are inseparable. Earlier, I drew on the work of Mitra and Gross (2009, p. 523), Lundy (2018) and other researchers to understand the meaning of learner voice and democracy in this piece of work. I felt that the learner voice should be heard first by the adults in order for democratic participation to prevail in the school. Nthontho (2017b) is concerned that "although the concept of student participation is globally encouraged and highly supported, education is still a means through which those with power gain dominion to the detriment of the less privileged" (p. 160). In light of that, the issue of learner participation has been debatable for decades in policymaking, and its implementation remains superficial (Mangiaracina et al., 2021).

Although learners have legal rights to participate in decision making as per the CRC, Lundy (2018) feels that having a voice is not enough in decision making, but the implementation of Article 12 of the CRC and the incorporation of other children's rights are most needed. Besides, Lundy (2018) maintains that the involvement of adults will remain critical in decision-making processes, as learners cannot make decisions entirely by themselves because of their ages and maturity. This is a clear indication that learners must be given a voice, and that voice should be heard by teachers and parents. As a result, learners would gain momentum to express their feelings and become the true composition of school reform through democratic participation.

Having enlightened the reader about the connection between the concepts above, I now turn the discussion to the significance and enablement of democratic participation.

2.2.5 Significance and enablement of learner democratic participation

It is presumed that, in every school, learners are the majority of the population and are considered capable of expressing their views regarding educational matters. Being regarded as capable of expressing their views suggests that they would also have the ability to be involved in the decision-making process. Schools that consider the presence of learners in the readjustment of their practices have a better chance to achieve their goals through democratic participation, which subsequently reduces turbulence (Mitra & Gross, 2009). Kahne et al.

(2022) found that schools that consider learners' critiques achieve better outcomes in various aspects, such as boosting learners' confidence in participation. In support, Guzman (2022) maintains that involving learners in school leadership through their voice and "encouraging them to make decisions and propose ideas for school change are essential, giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility" (p. 52). In addition, Flutter (2006) echoes this, saying that involving learners in school leadership "inspires pupils by putting them in the driving seat, giving them control and responsibility as clients" (p. 188). This literature suggests that it enhances their morale and makes them feel accountable for their school's welfare. Likewise, Grant and Kajee (2023) suggest that once learners realise that their involvement in school is recognised, they become more interested in school projects. On the contrary, "When students feel their lives, experiences, cultures, and aspirations are ignored, trivialized, or denigrated by the school and the curriculum, they develop a hostility to the institution of schooling" (Smyth, 2006, p. 279).

A school with multiple leaders is likely to be led well in comparison to a school with fewer leaders. To affirm that, Ellis (2020) suggests that listening to what learners have to say, "offers opportunities for teachers to improve their practice" (p. 26). Meaning that "student voice efforts therefore can provide a fresh or new way of seeing problems that had previously been ignored or misunderstood" (Mitra & Gross, 2009, p. 535). Aligning with this view, Guzman (2022) emphasises that "stakeholders have the opportunity to get involved in the planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation of their improvement plans that could help the school perform functionally and be able to clarify the need for interventions" (p. 52). Allowing participation "affords people a say in decisions that affect their goals and how they do their work, it drives up flexibility, responsibility and keeps morale high" (Akudo, 2020, p. 299). Democratic participation is not only beneficial to the school structure's welfare but also to student success in their academic performance. Thus, Conner (2022) suggests "student voice can also help prepare teachers to change how they think about their practice by challenging their underlying assumptions about student learning or effective teaching" (p. 51).

When learners collaborate with adults, they are likely to address problems in mature ways in anticipation of reaching a consensus with the adults. Després and Dube (2020) assert that a school environment where learner voice is listened to "implies rethinking established practices and authorities, decisions that were once taken by adults in silos are now discussed with learners and perhaps more importantly their inputs can result in effective transformation" (p.

3). This type of collaborative interactions would improve learners' pride in being part of the solution to problems. Lastly, learners' participation should be given enough attention to stop it from becoming a stumbling block towards the realisation of learners' democratic leadership development. However, having surrendered the power to learners does not mean they would automatically become experts, so they need proper direction from their teachers to gain confidence.

It can be seen that the democratic participation of learners contributes hugely to the wellness of school reform; however, the literature equally shared some factors that may hamper learner democratic participation in schools, which is discussed below.

2.2.6 Barriers to learner democratic participation

A society is made up of more than one person and every individual has their own uniqueness in terms of personal views and attitudes. These can create tension during discussions. Alluding to that, learners, teachers and parents constitute a school community; however, not every stakeholder in the school community may appreciate the advocacy of learner leadership – even learners themselves, who are the main target of the leadership initiative. Literature regarding the enactment of learner leadership has recognised cultural values, hierarchical structures, policy limitations, age and interaction disconnection as limiting factors. These are discussed below.

2.2.6.1 Cultural values

Culturally, children are less welcome to socialise with parents, especially in resolving family matters at home and in society in general. The practice of not allowing learners opportunities to engage with adults seems to be happening at most schools as well. Regarding this, Holquist et al. (2023) mention that “in the adult-led scenario, students tend not to experience opportunities to demonstrate leadership. They are positioned passively, as data sources rather than active stakeholders” (p. 729). Similarly, Duramy and Gal (2020) indicate that “the traditional cultural expectation that children must be obedient recipients of adult decisions results in children's lack of confidence and fear of being considered disrespectful and reproachable” (p. 4). As a result, “learners coming from this background where they are discouraged to speak out, may find it hard to suddenly voice their views” (Shikalepo & Kandjengo, 2021, p. 43), which eventually “diminishes learner leadership in schools” (ibid.).

In other cases, some adults avoid conversations with children and disregard the building of partnerships or children's input (Holquist & Walls, 2023). Some cultures even view adult-child dialogue as a disgrace to adults (Mncube, 2012). A similar observation is made by Cam et al. (2022) that some principals contribute to the restraining of learner leadership as they feel "it is not good to invite learners in issues like educator misbehaviour and educator conflicts as these might affect the dignity of the educator towards learners" (p. 444). Although literature reveals the need for young children to collaborate with adults, most parents are still reluctant to involve them in their discussions, especially when making decisions. Consequently, parents laterally impose their feelings upon the children, where the children sometimes would not appreciate their decisions and may end up not putting them into practice. It appears that some children agree with their parents without having their voices heard when seated with adults to show respect to their parents (Hanna, 2021). Contrary to that, Lundy (2018) indicates that "in many cultures children [learners] are entitled to be active participants in their own learning inside and outside the classroom through debate, discovery and engagement" (p. 4). Moreover, learners who are disregarded from participatory leadership practices become withdrawn at school (Grant & Kajee, 2023). The exclusion of learners in school leadership as a result of parents' and teachers' dominance over learners "causes them to become passive participants in democracy rather than leaders" (Grant, 2015, p. 95). In my own interpretation, it seems some adults feel intimidated by children who do not show respect for their elders, especially when children are allowed to express their feelings in their presence.

2.2.6.2 Hierarchical structure in a school set-up

Another aspect that hinders learner leadership is the retention of the status quo in some schools. A school equipped with multiple workforces that work collaboratively lightens the backlog of the daily responsibilities of those appointed in leadership positions. Young learners are the majority at schools, and it is important that their views are heard, as this might help their teachers to change in response to their learning needs for effective teaching (Conner et al., 2022). Thus, Capretta et al. (2024) express that "students can be the leaders of their own educational experiences and regular active participants in the interactions between their own parents and teachers" (p. 23).

In the absence of learner leadership, teachers and other stakeholders, besides learners, may oversee the minor problems that gradually affect learners' interest in their schooling. Presumably, some teachers feel that affording learners a voice is like giving their authority away and giving the learners control (Conner, 2022).

Of course, unbecoming attitudes might develop in learners when their voice is disregarded by the school leadership team. Due to some uncertainties, adults may still retain leadership power exclusively to themselves, which inhibits the innovative voices of learners and lessens the opportunities of inducing potential future leaders. In conclusion, Shikalepo and Kandjengo (2021) emphasise that “the hierarchical structure is made to accommodate ideas from top to bottom, making it harder for the custodians of schools to accommodate ideas from the bottom to top” (p. 43).

2.2.6.3 Policy limitations

The lack of ministerial policy on learner leadership also seems to constrain the practice. The Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture through the Namibian Basic Education Act. 3 of 2020, sings loud on the implementation of policy that promotes learners' involvement in the decision-making process with regard to their schooling welfare. With reference to that, schools are expected to emancipate learner leadership, including through LRCs, however, the directive policies for administrating these seem to be limited or missing (Kandjengo & Shikalepo, 2021). In addition, as Grant and Kajee (2023) state, the national frameworks are well articulated but fail to be implemented well enough in the schooling system. This certainly influences some schools to overlook such practices, since they are either less emphasised or not emphasised at all.

2.2.6.4 Age, a yardstick for leadership capability

Age is often used as an entry requirement for participation in decision-making processes. However, Hart (1992) maintains that children and parents should collaboratively share views in making decisions, hence, “it is unrealistic to expect them suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved” (p. 5). In essence, Nthontho (2017a) assumes that “ideally, age tends to be the main yardstick the society uses to ascertain who should and who should not enter into decision-making forums” (p. 4). In contention, Nthontho (2017a) maintains that to be a stakeholder in school should be dissociated from age but rather based on success.

Learners are expected to lead in their schools, and it is inappropriate to expect young learners to become good leaders if they are not exposed to leadership opportunities from a young age. It is ridiculous to anticipate quality leadership portrayal from learners who literally become leadership-orientated once they reach adulthood because leadership comes with challenges that can be addressed in the early stages of human development. It is suggested that when learners become involved in democracy from a young age, this practice of learners' participation is more likely to produce future leaders (Mncube, 2008). In emphasis, Yu and Shay (2022) observe that age differences in the hierarchical structure contribute to learners being discriminated against based on cultural beliefs about age, which stops them from expressing their views in decision-making processes. This attested itself in the context of our Namibian school's situation, where secondary phase learners are recognised ahead of primary phase learners, who are much younger.

2.2.6.5 Interaction disconnection among stakeholders

Finally, a lack of teacher interaction with learners creates a bridge of disconnection between the two parties. Learners may find it hard to initiate ideas without sufficient support from other stakeholders, such as teachers and parents. The lack of interaction between learners and teachers diminishes the interest of learners to constructively contribute to leadership development initiatives. Learners are possibly denied exercising democratic participation in decision-making processes since parents are worried about over-dominance by learners (Conner, 2022; Grant & Nekondo, 2016; Shipopyeni, 2019). In relation, Cam et al. (2022) indicate that senior educators labelled learners who usually focus on being negative and criticise the teachers rather than being helpful. In a broad sense, denying learners a voice may result in silence, where the learner may withdraw from discourse and disengage from participation (Hanna, 2021). Additionally, poor dialogue relations between teachers and learners are likely to have a negative impact on learner leadership development. Therefore, Capretta et al. (2024) assert that “developing leadership skills requires not only opportunities but also guidance and practice” (p. 24), and it is natural that children learn through parents' interactions (Hart, 2008). All in all, a lack of confidence in learners, peer pressure, and language challenges –especially the medium of communication (English) – are some of the dominant limiting factors observed (Conner, 2022; Kandjengo & Shikalepo, 2021).

Previous research regarding learner leadership was conducted, and that lays a theoretical foundation for the current study and future studies. A discussion of the theoretical framework that guides the study follows.

2.3 Theoretical Framework: Kurt Lewin's Field Theory and Theory of Change

A theory serves as fundamental evidence that provides the foreground of the particular research study that is being undertaken. Put simply, a theory is “an abstract description of the relationships between concepts that help us to understand the world” (Varpio et al., 2020, p. 990). This section discusses the evolution of the Lewinian field theory, which underpins my study. It further explains the theoretical framework that embraces field theory. According to Heale and Noble (2019), a theoretical framework is a set of concepts that determine the interactions and relationships among themselves in relation to the theory or phenomenon. In this regard, group dynamics and AR are the main subset concepts of field theory that were employed during PAR to stimulate leadership in senior primary school learners. Furthermore, it sheds light on the impacts that PAR and the three-step model of change have on learner leadership development through workshop sessions. In conclusion, it highlights the benefits and drawbacks embraced through the adoption of PAR.

2.3.1 Evolution of Lewinian field theory

Kurt Lewin was a Jewish psychologist who was renowned for the psychological theory he termed ‘field theory’. This study is informed by field theory and Lewin’s theory of change, which he introduced in 1934. Field theory, which was the most developed area of his work before his death (Burnes & Bargal, 2017), is conceptualised by the approach termed ‘field’ or ‘life space’, and the theory intends to understand human behaviour in a particular society (Burnes, 2004). According to this theory, the attitudes of individuals are the reproduction of the society where they belong (Burnes, 2020). Hence, to transform the school culture effectively, it began with the whole school before individual learners through the PAR workshop sessions where dialogue is emphasised (Roşca, 2020).

Lewin considered field theory, group dynamics and AR alongside the three-step model of change as one entity. Despite the theories having different themes, he saw them as inseparable; thus, they are integrated to bring about the planned school change (Burnes & Bargal, 2017; Roşca, 2020). Burnes and Bargal (2017) explain that field theory “examines patterns of

interactions between individuals and ... the surrounding environments in which they move” (p. 5). Furthermore, they describe the theory of change as a social change of the force field, where the change agent proposes ways to turn the existing level of the field into the desired state (ibid.). The relationship between these theories is that field theory serves as a mechanism for understanding the behaviours of society, whereas the theory of change builds from field theory to proposed action towards the social change of the society. The intention of my research is to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership among primary school learners, hence, group dynamics and AR fields are the most appropriate to underpin the study.

2.3.2 Field theory and group dynamics

The word ‘dynamics’ comes from the Greek word, *dynamic* meaning ‘force’. Group dynamics refers to “the forces operating in groups” (Burnes, 2004, p. 982), the social behaviours in a society that prevent change, which require certain forces to break it (Burnes, 2020). Lewin wrote about group dynamics and the importance of the group in shaping the behaviour of its members (Bargal et al., 1992). It is imperative to understand social behaviours in order to bring about change. There is a general consensus that in seeking to bring about social change, understanding group dynamics is key in order to comprehend possible reactions to change. Thus, it will be a great advantage to change the behaviours of a group of learners in the school rather than to change the behaviours of an individual learner in order to bring about changes. Therefore, group dynamics as a changing approach should be applied to initiate social habit change. With a similar notion, Lewin believed that effective group encounters where participation is highly motivated would likely bring change in individuals (Burnes, 2020). In addition, he developed AR and the three-step model to enable changes among members who engage in the change process and commit to changing behaviour (Burnes, 2004). Roşca (2020) highlights these change stages:

Stage 1: plan the change and clearly communicate it to the people, so that potential unclarities are reduced as much as possible.

Stage 2: motivate people to follow the plan and act upon the implementation of the change.

Stage 3: allow time for people to repeat the new (changed) behaviour all over again until they internalise it in their own set of skills and procedures. (p. 621)

2.3.3 Theory of change and action research

The purpose of the study was to stimulate and expand democratic participation to develop leadership roles in senior primary school learners at school. To change particular attitudes in learners is better when you change the whole school before individual learners; otherwise, that transformed individual might revert to the previous behaviour, which remained present in the society (Burnes, 2004). The adoption of AR facilitated a reduction of sidelining primary school learners in school leadership and promoted their participation through collegial empowerment as democratic participants in the school setting. The prime objective was to engage learners in mitigating the problem but not necessarily resolving it. Thus, MacDonald (2012) explains that AR “involves an action researcher and community or organization members who are seeking to improve their situation” (p. 36). Similarly, Burnes (2020) posits that AR is an issue of choice, voluntary participation and equal democratic decision making of those involved. Learners were expected to change their perceptions about their leadership roles once they valued the importance of them. Giving them a space towards democratic participation does not automatically make them active participants. In relation, Burnes (2004) also refers to Lewin’s work that AR is informed by changes brought about by action through proper guidance, and its success depends on the felt needs of individuals.

2.3.4 Participatory action research and three-step model of change

2.3.4.1 Understanding PAR

The definition of PAR differs based on the researchers’ focus and the disciplines from which they are approaching it. Reason and Bradbury (2008) explain PAR as a participatory process that seeks to bring about change on matters that concern certain individuals and their communities. According to Nelson (2014), the definition of PAR constitutes several attributes – it builds capacity, focuses on community development, promotes access to social justice and participation, fosters democracy, is equitable, liberating and life-enhancing and provides agency by giving voice to society. Similarly, Chevalier and Buckles (2019) view PAR as a collective of participative views of individuals and initiate actions regarding the well-being of society. Moreover, Kemmis and McTaggart (2005) understand it as a research process influenced by five spiral steps: planning, action, process and the outcomes, which are predetermined by ongoing self-reflective cycles. Still on that, Rumsey et al. (2022) understand

PAR as a framework that “focuses on collaborative participation, action and reflection by members of communities affected by that research” (p. 1298). Besides having a focus on collective consultation, it also seeks appropriate approaches for knowledge production (Rumsey et al., 2022).

2.3.4.2 Participatory action research enhances learners’ participation

Several researchers presented their interpretations of the concept of PAR as a study that is meant to find out why a certain problem exists and seek ways to improve it. According to Gillis and Jackson (2002), PAR “is considered a subject of AR which is systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change by generating practical knowledge” (p. 264). In line with the above conviction that PAR is a subset of AR, it is maintained that the research participants in the study should be those who are affected by the situation (MacDonald, 2012). This study was mainly focused on transforming learners into the leadership circle and regarded them as the key participants in the study. In fact, the study advocated the development of learner leadership through democratic participation in their own schools in order to change their attitudes to become better leaders.

Next, I examine some factors that might promote learner democratic participation and develop learner leadership through their involvement in PAR.

(a) Creates a space of participation

Self-reflection is possibly the most important factor that enhances the opportunities for change to take place in a successful institution. In this view, teachers, parents, learners and other stakeholders are required to participate in decision making for collective school effectiveness (Pascual, 2023). To address this, a PAR seeks to inclusively involve learners in the change process through workshop sessions so that they build the confidence to be able to participate freely in school affairs. Accordingly, Rule and John (2011) posit that the “participatory methods create space for active involvement by participants” (p. 83). Furthermore, Kennan et al. (2019) express that dialogue with children during meetings and recording their views in writing, such as completing a worksheet, enhances their space to participate. This highlights that learners as research participants need to be given the space to adapt to the new environment for them to change where transformation is needed.

b) Promotes dialogue among participants

PAR further promotes the dialogue among participants to resolve issues through active collaborative interaction. Dialogue helps the researcher to better understand the originality of the problem being addressed, as the participants are serving equally as sources of information (co-researchers) and objects of the study. In relation, Petras and Porpora (1993) stated that participatory research attempts to generate knowledge about social relations and social changes more democratically by fostering dialogue and equality between researchers and the researched. Furthermore, Rule and John (2011) similarly share that the purpose of engaging participants is to “generate understanding which empowers participants to take action to solve problems and improve their circumstances” (p. 83). Likewise, MacDonald (2012) describes the process as “involving an action researcher and community or organization members who are seeking to improve their situation” (p. 36). Endrejat and Burnes (2024), drawing on Lewin’s writings, suggest that a strong dialogue is a prominent tool among the participants who are the main change agents for the study. Engaging learners in intense dialogical exposure has great impacts on learner leadership development (Grant, 2015).

c) Enhances democracy and equality in decision-making processes

PAR widens the chances for learners to express themselves since they are exposed to an atmosphere where they are persuaded to understand their role as participants in the research study, which they can then transfer to their societies. This practice might be easily achieved once learners are given the space to believe in themselves and understand the meaning of democracy through their worthy participation. In support of this sentiment, Bergold and Thomas (2012) mention that participatory research is mainly founded on democracy, where research participants are offered safe spaces for participants. PAR requires a great willingness on the part of participants to disclose their personal views of the situation and their opinions and experiences. This is similarly expressed by Chakravarty (2018), who feels that democracy enables “the flourishing of ideas through tolerance of diversity and rational discourse over differences, which confer[s] legitimacy on democratic decisions, require[s] liberty to explore and propagate views” (p. 237). Similarly, Shier (2001) agrees that the “benefits of children’s participation in decision making improve quality of service provision, increase children’s sense of ownership and belonging, increase self-esteem, [and] increase responsibility” (p. 115).

d) Creates self-awareness

Turning the participants into co-researchers enables them to become self-reflective about their successes and failures in life. As they would be involved in this participatory study, they would be required to assess what they have achieved so far in the project and which areas they would possibly have to improve. Bergold and Thomas (2012) state that PAR is conducted with the immediately affected persons, with the aim being the reconstruction of their knowledge and ability in a process of understanding and empowerment. With similar sentiment, Reason and Bradbury (2008) argue that PAR “seeks to bring together action and reflection, theory and practice, in participation with others in pursuit of practical solutions to issues of pressing concerns to people, and more generally the flourishing of the individual persons and their communities” (p. 4).

e) Arouses motivation

Participatory Action Research (PAR) advocates the inclusion of members for whom the research study is intended to be conducted (MacDonald, 2012). The PAR process necessitates the in-depth investigation of a problem and eventually figuring out the possible practices that could remedy the problem. Allowing the participants to express their views on the issues affecting them would pique their interest, anticipating that positive outcomes of the study would be borne from their contribution. MacDonald (2012) quoted McNiff and Whitehead (2006, p. 36) “that people would be more motivated about their work if they were involved in the decision-making about how the workplace was run”. Having involved learners in leadership practices using PAR workshops as a means of training encouraged them to feel recognised, mostly through appraisal (Nandasinghe, 2020).

f) Diminishes power struggle

The underlying focus of PAR is primarily to challenge the status quo in the school environment to the point that learners and teachers are deemed equally important. Therefore, PAR “seeks to equalize the exchange relation between researchers and the subjects they study through some form of collaboration” (Petrus & Porpora, 1993, p. 111). With a similar sentiment, Philips et al. (2010) express that PAR

seeks to democratize knowledge by putting the tools of inquiry into the hands of those affected by issues, thereby moving them from being the object of study to the central position of

researcher. By privileging youth voices and experiences in the learning process PAR attempts to reduce, if not eliminate, the hegemony of powerful stakeholders, such as adults in the case of middle-school students, oppressive knowledge and structures. (p. 181)

Therefore, teachers should consider learners as equally important stakeholders to bring about changes in the school. Having discussed some of the beneficial effects of PAR on participants, I now turn my attention to the possible drawbacks associated with it.

2.3.4.3 Drawbacks associated with PAR

Participative research is a spiral process that requires continual reflections to assess the progress made towards the transitional change that ought to be achieved. Since it implies continuity even after the initial changes have been observed, some participants might see it as a prolonged activity and could lose their interest in the study, causing it not to meet its objectives. Hence, Bennett (2019) feels that most research projects that require participatory activities are deemed too time-consuming by participants, as they require continual repetition.

The issue of ethical commitments could be both beneficial and harmful to the study. Giving participants the right to withdraw from the study on their own time might increase their chances of withdrawing at the slightest disappointment. On that, Arifin (2018) contests that “participants need to be adequately informed about the research, comprehend the information and have a power of freedom of choice to allow them to decide whether to participate or decline” (p. 30).

Seemingly a utopian goal, PAR has a myriad of problems surrounding its practices because they are based on individual experiences (Nelson, 2014). Since PAR, in this case, involved learners of different behaviours, this might affect the findings of the study if they were dishonest with their responses. In support, Nelson (2014) stated that the involvement of certain participants in the research process may skew the desired outcomes due to the individuals’ personalities. MacDonald (2012) argues that the involvement of the community can also compromise the study outcomes. For example, if the community, such as learners in this case, creates disinterest in the study, they might leave, and the source of data generation would be lost. This is equally felt by Cornwall and Jewkes (1995), who urge that despite PAR promoting a balance of power regarding community participation, in some cases the participants do not participate and disregard the control of the researchers.

MacDonald (2012) feels that PAR seems to confuse novice researchers in differentiating the concepts involved. Since AR, participatory research, and PAR all seem interchangeable, in some instances some researchers may not fully know what should be studied during the participatory process. Another challenge is raised by Simonds and Christopher (2013) that the concealment of identity is regarded as unethical when conducting research in some communities, unlike in Western research principles where anonymity is highly recommended. Lastly, Brydon-Miller (2012) posits that researchers might be guilty of “overlooking power dynamics within these communities themselves, which may privilege some while silencing others. Inequality based on gender, age, class and caste location can all influence who is allowed to participate in these decision-making processes and who is excluded” (p. 160). Emphasising this view, Cornish et al. (2023) express that power inequalities with respect to egalitarian relationships and dialogue among the participants remain a major hindrance to PAR effectiveness.

2.3.5 Participatory action research “A systematic transition process”

The study aimed to stimulate democratic participation in primary school learners; thus, their involvement mattered the most. PAR was used in the process to respond to the research question: *How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?* Gillis and Jackson (2002) explain PAR as a subset of AR, which is the “systematic collection and analysis of data for the purpose of taking action and making change” (p. 264). In addition, Burnes (2004, p. 206) cited Lewin (1946), who mentioned that the process of AR proceeds in a spiral of steps, a circle of planning, action and fact-finding about the result of an action. In addition, Burnes and Bargal (2017) indicate that Lewin appreciated the evaluation component in AR, which informs participants of the progress made and proposes further adjustments regarding the previous intervention. This coincides with O’Leary’s cycle of research, which is underpinned by four steps, namely: observe, reflect, plan and act. This cycle of AR was repeated until the desired objectives were achieved. Figure 2.1 illustrates O’Leary’s (2004) cycle of research process.

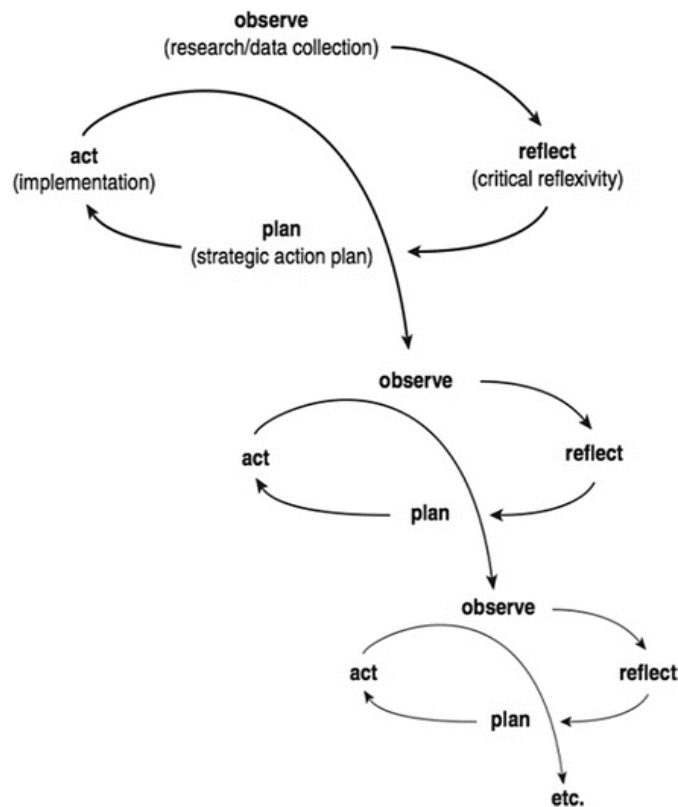


Figure 2.1: O'Leary's cycle of research process (O'Leary, 2004, p. 141)

During AR, I used the O'Leary Cycle of Research to conduct workshops with participants (learners). The workshops were conducted repeatedly, and participants initiated various activities to achieve democratic-orientated participation. During the workshops, the participants' interactions were observed, and finally, a reflection session was carried out together with the participants. To achieve the change process, Lewin (1947) developed a three-step model of change (unfreezing, moving and refreezing), which was further presented by Lewin (1951) as cited in Hossan (2015) – see Figure 2.2. A brief description follows.

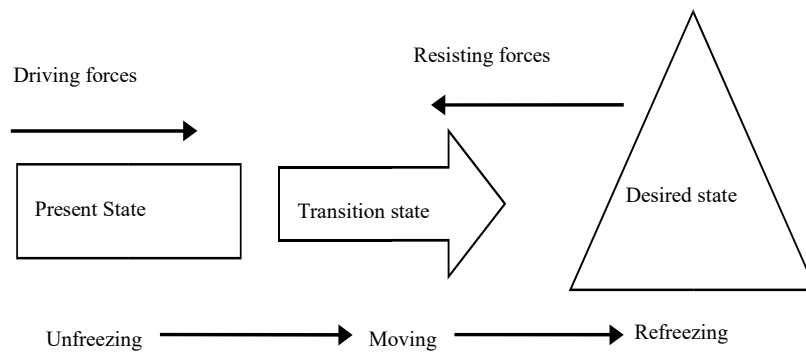


Figure 2.2: Lewin's planned change approach (Lewin, 1951 cited in Hossan, 2015, p. 58)

a) Step 1: Unfreezing

The rationale behind this research study was to destabilise the behaviour among primary school learners to become democratic participants, which might turn them into potential future leaders. To convince learners to accept that a change was necessary and new social behaviours were required was the first step; this is what is termed “unfreezing” (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). The study served as a mechanism to stimulate democratic participation in primary school learners who seem ignored in school leadership and equally to transform them from passive to active participants. The study also served to destabilise the present social behaviours of society, especially the way teachers involve learners in democratic participation and the sharing of leadership responsibilities. To achieve this, the contention between the driving force towards change and the restraining force was properly addressed. The driving force was motivated to gradually suppress the restraining forces of present societal behaviours (Schein, 1996). With a similar sentiment, Roşca (2020) reiterates that “Lewin asserted that driving forces were needed in order to initiate a change” (p. 619). Hence, the study advocated the PAR workshop sessions, where I presented topics on democracy such as the rights of children to participate.

The workshop sessions were guided by the work of Lundy (2007), who advocates that children should be given a ‘space’ to express themselves freely where they are safe from fear of being reproached and degraded by adults. Learners are believed to participate better in the absence of adults to develop their ‘voice’ by promoting free engagement in discussions. Therefore, the initiation of the PAR workshop sessions was exclusively meant for learners to participate among themselves without adults. Since I was the only adult (researcher) in the study, this

might have lessened the intimidation and anxiety that the participants could have possibly felt if there was any other adult present in the PAR workshop room.

i) Disconfirmation

Initiating changes to their existing culture is likely to be a fearful experience for individuals or groups; in some instances, it is rare for people to appreciate proposed changes without negativity. This could also take place with these primary school learners during the transformation for the stimulation of democratic participation and the development of leadership. Schein (1996) indicates that “all forms of learning and changes start with some forms of dissatisfaction or frustration generated by the data that conform our expectations” (p. 29). The participants have their own expectations of what they will achieve from the study, and they may develop fears of participating freely in discussions, especially during the research. For various reasons, participants could fool me by providing the wrong information during the data collection process in avoidance or to blame the authority of their school. Therefore, Roşca (2020) insists that, as long as insecurity persists, the planned change will be hardly achieved, despite having good initiatives in place; hence, “Lewin asserted that driving forces were needed in order to initiate a change” (p. 619). Consequently, I emphasised freedom of speech to the participants because communication among the learners and between teacher and learners plays a key role in breaking the status quo, as change occurs where there is openness (Roşca, 2020).

Participants were required to express their views genuinely so that we could reach the reality of the findings through individual interviews, focus group interviews and reflective journals. Thus, Schein (1996) advises that for participants to change, they should be ready to accept the information as it is if they want to meet the set goal for the study: ‘survival guilt’. According to Lundy (2007), at first, learners need to be given the space to adapt to the environment so that the people they are interacting with develop the confidence to enable them to express their views. Therefore, giving them enough time to adapt to the new environment would eventually suppress anxiety regarding the change that is being advocated during the research process. In this regard, participants were prepared to accept the data as it actually was, so the outcomes of the research study would reach its objectives. Once this point is achieved where participants are ready to accept their real situation rather than what they wish to see, this is referred to as ‘survival anxiety’.

ii) Induction of guilt (survival anxiety)

Research participants, especially the learners who may be participating in a research study for the first time, might feel nervous to express their views about their confidence in becoming active agents of change. Survival anxiety is another step towards learning anxiety (Schein, 1996). At this stage, learners are expected to be confident enough to accept reality and become less defensive. The feeling is that, if we allow ourselves to enter a learning or change process, if we admit to ourselves and others that something is wrong, we lose our effectiveness, our self-esteem, or our identity (Schein, 1996). Learners with low self-esteem were afraid to express their feelings, which might prompt them to provide wrong responses. However, once the research participants feel that they are ready to accept the data gathered as valid and relevant for them to achieve the desired change, then they are regarded as having reached the degree of “psychological safety”.

iii) Creation of psychological safety (overcoming of learning anxiety)

Learners may not be able to change while they are under threat for providing honest data. Therefore, learners were reassured and urged to accept the situations as they were during data generation, be they negative or positive. If psychological safety is not fully created, learners feel nervous, which consequently restricts the opportunity for change (Schein, 1996). Since psychological safety is created during the unfreezing stage, learners were first prepared to accept one another through different mechanisms of team building, such as group work, one-on-one conversations with me and so forth. Once they achieved the unfreezing stage, then I believed that the learners were prepared to face the real problem during the PAR workshop sessions. After this stage, they were ready to move on to the next step in the model of change: the ‘moving’ step.

b) Step 2: Moving “changing stage”

I considered this step a transitional stage towards social change regarding learner participation in the school. Simply, it is a learning step towards adopting new acceptable social behaviours of individuals and groups through the iterative approach of AR (Schein, 1996). Learners, who are the main participants of the study, were transformed through good communication among themselves and empowered to participate confidently during workshops as part of PAR. Burnes (2020) quoted Lewin (1936a, p. 216), who defined moving as locomotion – “a change of

position within a field” (p. 36). Related to that, Burnes (2020) draws from the work of Lewin (1946) in highlighting that the “purpose of AR is to allow those involved to understand and manage the process of locomotion, that is, to allow them to move successfully through their life space” (p. 40). I found my analytic tools linked well with the “Lewinian moving step”, as both Lundy’s model of participation and Hart’s ladder advocate change by moving participants from one stage to another until they reach the point where they are capable of leading themselves in decision-making processes.

c) Step 3: Refreezing

To ‘refreeze’ a substance, I simply felt, is to solidify it; this keeps its shape without turning into liquid. In contextualising my understanding of the term to this study, for the learners to become democratic participants, they were motivated to continue being active participants during the PAR sessions because “without reinforcement, the change could be short-lived” (Lewin, 1947a, cited in Burnes, 2004, p. 986). In fact, the stabilisation of learner participation depends on consistent, repeated reflections, rewards and supervision during PAR sessions until internalised (Mahmud et al., 2022). According to Lewin’s step model of the change process, this step is the stage where social change is expected to occur and eventually be maintained. The study intended to conduct PAR as a means of transformation, where participants reflected on the progress made regarding democratic participation in their focus groups and schools. Reflections were carried out during workshops repeatedly to affirm that a social change has occurred and is being sustained. Burnes (2020) quoted Lewin (1943d, p. 48) when he emphasised that change is necessary “to bring about the permanence of the new situation” (p. 50) through iterative practice. Frankly, it is not easy to maintain new behaviour among learners; therefore, “The key for this stage is to allow enough time for people to practice with the changed behaviour until they internalize it and make it their new way of doing things” (Roşca, 2020, p. 620). For example, with reference to Grant (2015), honours students observed through various school clubs that new social behaviours were adapted by learners and were maintained in the school through continual participatory initiatives. Therefore, Burnes (2004) expresses that “freezing seeks to stabilise behaviour at a new quasi-stationary equilibrium in order to ensure that it is relatively safe from regression” (p. 986).

2.3.6 Critiques of Lewin's three-step model of change

Despite the three-step model of change being recognised as beneficial, some theorists highlight some criticisms that Lewin seemed to have overlooked in his theory. Burnes (2020) states that the Lewinian model is criticised for being simplistic, linear and prescriptive and that it does not comprise a naturally occurring sequence and lacks a cognitive dimension (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015). I highlight some aspects of this critique and present some of the counterarguments below. As a researcher, I took cognisance of the points presented.

Being simplistic: The three-step model appears simplistic but emerges as a more complex approach to changing human behaviours. Burnes (2020) contends, with Cummings et al. (2016, p. 33) claim, and mentions that Lewin did little regarding his theory as it only flourished after his death. The model is demonstrated through the prolonged iterative nature of the three processes, the core purpose of each process, and the key underlying elements of the entire model.

Being linear does not comprise a naturally occurring sequence: A sequence is an order of events that may include several dimensions or steps, an order of events in particular stages, and the duration of each stage (Bartunek & Woodman, 2015). The Lewinian model is less descriptive of the three stages of change and fails to present that some sequences should consider cycling back and forth, and most importantly, it does not suggest what to do if no movement has occurred. However, Burnes (2020) argues that the model is not linear since it advocates continuity through “iterative processes as his diagrams and AR approach in Lewin (1947a, 1947b) show, an iterative process of fact-finding, action and further fact-finding” (p. 48). Furthermore, Schein (1996) expresses that the Lewinian theory is a powerful change model for human systems, which is fundamentally necessary to explain various situations (p. 28). In this case, the criticism of the linearity of the theory seems unjustifiable since it is adapted to suit different contexts.

Timing: The Lewin model does not propose a minimum amount of time needed to unfreeze, move and refreeze. A timetable would be suggested to see when organisational members can determine their progress at each stage of change. Bartunek and Woodman (2015) mention that Lewin (1947) did not consider timing in terms of the best time to act (window of opportunity for change). This was not explicit in his model, and he did not address any other dimensions of

timing. Learners were expected to change their social habits to adopt the new transitional change and become active participants rather than being passive through democratic participation. It was not easy to determine the time that the changing process would take since it depended on the life space of participants. Besides, the theory made it clear that transformational change will come through iterative spiral processes that are continual. Despite the time challenge, the study has had positive impacts on learner leadership development.

Pacing: This is the speed at which change is expected to occur at different times in the change processes. For Bartunek and Woodman (2015), speed is important from the beginning of a change effort to break the quasi-stationary equilibrium and generate enough momentum for a change. This area was not given enough attention by Lewin's model. Contrarily, Burnes (2020) contends that the Lewinian model serves as a guideline on which other researchers have to build their practices and see how it will fit their situation. Therefore, in this study, I extended the duration of PAR sessions sometimes since some groups were slower and we had to consider their contribution.

2.4 Conclusion

This chapter reviewed the literature that underpinned learner democratic participation and leadership development in learners. It further provided an in-depth foundation for the research study concerning the main concepts, including learner leadership, learner voice and democratic participation, and discussed the theoretical and conceptual framework.

CHAPTER THREE: RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

This chapter provides a blueprint for the reader to understand the processes that were used in the study. Mishra and Alok (2017) describe methodology as an approach in which research problems are solved systematically using different steps to study a research problem effectively. This chapter highlights the processes that were used to conduct this study successfully. I then discuss the processes of the research design, research paradigm and AR methods. The research site, positionality and sampling procedures of research participants are also described. Later, I outline how data were generated using data generation tools and describe the data analysis process. The chapter concludes with an outline of the ethical considerations that guided the study, the gatekeeper's permission, the participants' consent and lastly, the data management principles.

3.2 Research Goals and Questions

Research is conducted to reflect on areas that need improvement and, in some cases, to create awareness in the affected society. Using PAR at a rural school in the Omusati Region, Namibia, the study intended to create a space for learners to participate democratically and through this to eventually develop learner leadership. The following were the goals that prompted my research:

- To better understand how the notion of learner democratic participation is perceived within the school.
- To establish the activities learners could lead or are involved in at the school.
- To engage in PAR to surface the factors that may enable or constrain leadership development in learners and to stimulate the development of leadership among primary school learners.

To achieve the mentioned goals, the overall research question was determined as follows: *How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?*

To address this overall research question, the sub-questions have been separated into two phases:

Phase One

1. How is the notion of learner democratic participation perceived within the school?
2. What activities do learners lead at the school?
3. What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?

Phase Two

This phase has certainly necessitated the engagement of learners in the research as co-researchers and participants simultaneously; hence, their interaction has enabled us to address the question below:

4. How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

3.3 Research Paradigm and Nature of the Study: Critical and Qualitative

People usually have different views, beliefs and assumptions and will draw conclusions about the situation investigated. A research paradigm “is a set of assumptions or beliefs about fundamental aspects of reality which gives rise to a particular world view” (Nieuwenhuis, 2007, p. 47). A paradigm consists of three sets of assumptions which begin with what people think and view the world based on perceptions, beliefs, or nature of reality (Ontology), construction of knowledge (epistemology) and how the knowledge is developed to find the reality through systematic investigations (methodology) (Hussain et al., 2013). Speaking from an ontological perspective regarding my study, the relation exists between the researcher, teachers and senior primary learners. It addressed how teachers perceive the young learners in regard to leadership development in primary schools. Ontologically, critical researchers view every human being as a unique individual who has different views relating to his/her environments, and this leads to multiple truths (Ugwu et al., 2021). This worldview prompted me to conduct the research study on learner leadership to construct knowledge through social interactions. Through this

research study, “reality is constructed and interpreted by individuals according to their ideological and cultural positions” (Hussain et al., 2013, p. 2376), where the findings might be interpreted to suit somebody’s opinion.

This study was framed by a critical paradigm. A critical paradigm focuses on how people see the world and reflect on their situation, then take action to change it (Scotland, 2012). The focus of the study was to improve the current practice so that it brought changes to the situation by developing leadership opportunities among senior primary school learners through the practice of democratic participation in school leadership. In this case, I felt that a research study was required to be undertaken where the researcher was expected to investigate and understand why a particular behaviour was happening in school society. However, I did not only expect to understand the situation but also to take action to bring about change under a critical paradigm. Thus, the main purpose of a critical paradigm is to bring about change (Cohen et al., 2011). Epistemology has subjective evidence which is obtained from those affected in the context of their environments, hence, researchers and participants must engage in dialogue to strengthen social interactions to build knowledge about the situation (Ugwu et al., 2021). In the context of my study, I engaged with the participants through individual interviews, focus group interviews, and reflective journals, and observed them through PAR sessions where they demonstrated their leadership capability in order to get the true picture of the situation being studied.

The data were collected through a **qualitative approach**, as Mertens (2010) explains that “qualitative methods are used in research which is designed to provide an in-depth description of a specific program, practice or setting” (p. 225). Both teachers and learners become qualitative researchers, being the research participants, were subjected to in-depth inquiry in order to provide descriptive responses to the research questions. Therefore, Dodgson (2017) claims that the “qualitative researcher becomes part of the research process because he or she is interacting within the study” (p. 355). Similarly, Muzari et al. (2022) explain that “the qualitative approach has the ability to extract and generate detailed, rich and thick descriptions based on the views of the participants” (p. 16). In addition, this study is a qualitative one because it is non-numerical and relied heavily on descriptive data from individual interviews, focus group interviews and reflective journaling.

3.4 Research Design

A plan is the first step that I took into consideration before undertaking the research study. This study did not happen in a vacuum; it was informed by previous theories and research. According to Indu et al. (2019), a research design refers to an “overall strategy that is chosen to integrate the different components of a study in a coherent and logical manner to ensure that the research problem is addressed effectively” (p. 64). In addition, Mishra and Alok understood research design as a “general procedure that you choose to combine the various components of the study in a consistent and logical way” (2017, pp. 7–8). A research design is determined on ‘methodological assumptions’, a third set of the research paradigm. Methodology assumptions are viewed as “general principles which underscore how we investigate the social world and how we demonstrate that the knowledge generated is valid” (Hussain et al., 2013, p. 2376). Therefore, this study was influenced by the theoretical idea of Kurt Lewin, who expressed that to solve a problem successfully, those who are affected should be involved in the process through group encounters (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). Since learner leadership seemed less practicable in schools, learners were involved in the practice and outcome of the study. The study was based on AR, “where research relies on the democratic principles of cooperation among researchers and clients” (Burnes & Bargal, 2017, p. 8). Therefore, having learners and the researcher engaged in discussions would lead to new knowledge development regarding learner leadership in primary schools.

AR increases the learners’ involvement in a social situation that requires change and then seeks approaches that will bring about that change. In this case, the study focused on senior primary learners who seldom participated democratically in school leadership. With PAR being a subset component of AR, I found it to be effective in improving the situation of learners to enhance their participation in school reform programmes in a democratic manner.

Since the goal of this study was to stimulate leadership opportunities among primary learners, it is qualitative research that is meant to “develop concepts related to social phenomena in real settings through the meanings, experiences and views of all the participants” (Indu et al., 2019, p. 66). The PAR process was guided by the O’Leary’s (2004) cycle research, of which consists of four steps: *observing, planning, implementation and reflection*.

3.5 Action Research Methods

An AR approach guided the study. Greenwood and Levin (1998) explain this approach as a systematic process where generated data are analysed, interpreted and then tested through actions. Learners were the affected members of the school society regarding their participation in the school leadership; as a result, they were deemed suitable participants in the study. MacDonald (2012) mentioned that AR involves an “action researcher and community or organisation members who are seeking to improve their situation” (p. 36). Therefore, I found the AR approach appropriate for my study since it aimed to stimulate democratic participation through workshop sessions to develop leadership in primary learners. The ultimate objective was to change the practice so that these learners became citizens in the school society regarding their involvement in decision-making processes and initiation of ideas.

3.6 Research Site

The study focused on understanding social practices and shifting worldviews at Omuti Primary School (pseudonym), a rural school in northern Namibia’s Omusati Region. The school is accessible by a gravel road near a town and serves grades 1 to 7. Due to low enrolment, it does not offer pre-primary education. The staff consists of a male principal (me), seven teachers, an administrative officer and a cleaner. Despite being overstaffed by four teachers based on 2016 norms, they were retained due to curriculum demands. The current enrolment is 148 learners.

The school infrastructure includes two permanent blocks, a staffroom and a storeroom made from shacks, and it is fully electrified with safety fencing. There is a community kindergarten close to the school boundary, though the school itself does not offer pre-primary classes. Regular repair programmes maintain school furniture. Morning devotions are held by teachers and learners, with learners also being responsible for flag ceremonies. An organogram in the staffroom lists staff and school board members for easy identification.

The school board, governed by a constitution, includes seven members (three teachers and four parents). Teachers participate in various committees, each led by a team leader. The school has a playground, netball court and football field that is shared with the community. Study sessions take place from Monday to Thursday, often supervised by class monitors. The school was established in 1991 with 44 learners and grew to a peak of 189 in 2007, with enrolment

gradually declining since. Having discussed the site of the study, I now give attention to my position in the study.

3.7 Positionality

Being a researcher myself, it is important to know my position regarding the research study being undertaken. Positionality refers to my relationship with the research participants and the school where I conducted my study. Fenge et al. (2019) indicate that positionality “relates to an acknowledgement of the multiple roles and positions that researchers and research participants bring to the research process” (p. 3). It is a description of how researchers situate themselves in their studies through disclosing their identity, limitations and opportunities, which enlighten the readers on their influence in such studies (Savolainen et al., 2023). Being a school principal and a researcher at the same school, I regarded my position in this study as an insider. According to Holmes (2020), insiders are “researchers whose view of reality is situated within the cultural practice of research participants such as behaviours and actions” (p. 5). For example, I conversed with the learners all the time, and we spoke the same Indigenous language, which enabled me to translate the interview questions into the vernacular and equally reduced the communication barrier for participants. I undertook the research at my school due to the possible benefits of developing leadership among our learner participants and the issue of costs in terms of travel and time.

I believed that my position as a principal could have affected the study as a result of power dynamics between myself and the learner participants. I was aware that the issue of power relations needed to be considered to avoid potential risks to the study. Subsequently, I held a discussion with the research participants prior to the commencement of the study. Firstly, I informed the participants that the research was guided by ethical principles, and they were encouraged to share information as honestly as possible. Secondly, they were assured that the research was a completely separate exercise, and the participants should disregard my work title (principal) while we engaged in research activities. I wore casual clothes, like a school uniform, shorts and slippers, so that they viewed me from a different perspective compared to the formal attire I used while in the office. By dressing so, it would suppress participants’ anxiety; otherwise, according to Holmes (2020), “respondents may be less willing to reveal sensitive information” (p. 6). In other words, participants might withhold sensitive information

from me, which they might reveal to an outsider whom they might see occasionally. Moreover, I advised them to address me as “Brother T” instead of using my name, formal title or ‘Sir’.

Thirdly, I chose to use a junior primary classroom because none of the participants was in the junior phase, and I wanted them to experience a new environment to their usual classrooms. I felt that using a classroom that some of the participants used daily (or a room similar to such a classroom) would have negatively affected their participation. Thus, all the participants were in a new classroom when the workshop sessions were conducted.

Fourthly, I needed to be reflective and engaged in journaling, which enabled me to contrast the reflections done by learner participants during the workshop sessions. This helped me to ignore my lived experience of the school culture. I also selected a critical friend for this study. According to Mat Noor and Shafee (2021), a critical friend is a trusted, knowledgeable person who is willingly interested in someone’s research study and contributes through proactive questions, criticism and support to ensure trustworthiness and ethicality. Some of the critical friend’s roles were to reflect and critique the research processes and findings presented, provide consistent monitoring of the steps of the research process and sampling of participants, and ensure credibility of transcript interviews. Involving a critical friend might minimise potential data biases, regulate the power dynamics and ensure that the trustworthiness of the study is not compromised (Fenge et al., 2019). Besides, the particular critical friend in this study has advanced experience and a good reputation in academic research in the past, and I am convinced they were fit to fulfil this role. For authenticity and ethics protocols, I ensured that the critical friend signed a confidentiality agreement. In addition, the critical friend did not form part of the workshop sessions to suppress power relations and to provide space for free participation to the participants (Lundy, 2018).

Having provided my positionality in the research, I now move to the discussion of sampling of research participants.

3.8 Sampling of Research Participants

The appropriate sampling of a certain number of participants from the school population prompted this study to be effective. The study was conducted based on two groups from the school population. These were primary teachers (grades 1–7) and senior primary learners (grades 4–7). The sample population is a group of individuals who are targeted to take part in

research based on their characteristics and interests and their suitability to the research objectives (Martínez-Mesa et al., 2016). From the sample population, I sampled the study participants, which comprised three primary teachers and 15 learners from grades 4 to 7. According to Moser and Korstjens (2018), sampling is “a process of selecting ... participants who provide rich data of the phenomenon of interest” (p. 10).

Firstly, I spoke to all senior primary learners about the purpose of the study and its expectations. I further informed them that participation in the study was voluntary, and ethical principles were discussed in detail. Thereafter, I informed them that the study requires everybody's participation, however, it was only expected to accommodate 15 participants (learners). Interested learners were asked to collect the assent letters to complete themselves, and later on, they also took assent letters to their parents for approval.

The participants were purposively sampled as four learners from each grade were given an opportunity to participate in the study to ensure fair representation in the study composition (grades 4–7). I preferred that learners were different in terms of confidence (high or low self-esteem), age and maturity constituted the study composition. I was influenced by Percy-Smith and Thomas's view (2010), who posited that “views of the child must be given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (p. 2). According to Pham et al. (2021), purposive sampling is used when “a diverse sample is necessary or opinion of experts in a particular field is the topic of interest” (p. 328). Conclusively, I chose purposive sampling because I wanted to create an opportunity for leadership development among these senior primary school learners.

The study attracted 17 learner participants who completed and signed the assent letters for participation. Only 15 learners returned the assent letters and consent letters signed by their parents, and they subsequently formed part of the study. The participants understood the study ethics that made provision for them to leave the study without inquiry, if necessary. Besides, the study did not restrict the participants from participation. Furthermore, the learner participants equally served as co-researchers during the PAR workshops, and they reflected on the activities conducted using a reflective journal sheet.

Secondly, the sampling of teachers was conducted with adherence to ethical principles. The teachers were equally informed about the study, and they were given a chance to volunteer to participate. The study required three primary school teachers to mitigate the power relations

issue, and they were randomly sampled to give equal opportunity to them to participate. All seven primary teachers were offered this opportunity despite the number restriction for the study participants. Teachers were informed to collect and sign the agreement letters, which contained detailed information regarding the study. Out of seven teachers, only three teachers collected the consent forms and signed them. During the study briefing, most teachers seemed to struggle to speak in English, so I explained that they were free to use any language of their choice to reduce anxiety about communication barriers. Since English was not their first language, I acknowledged this as a barrier to communication. Thus, I drew from Shier's views (2001), who suggested that learners whose first language is not English should communicate in the language they understand to overcome communication barriers. The teacher participants were individually interviewed during phase one (contextual profiling) of the study.

Thirdly, most participants experience a language communication barrier (English). They opted to use the vernacular, and, consequently, most responses were expressed in the vernacular. The critical friend understood the vernacular well; therefore, they were able to confirm that the content of the transcription reflected the views of the learner participants.

3.9 Data Generation Tools

Data generation is the process of gathering information from different sources, such as people, documents and audio records (Sharma, 2022). In essence, participants are seen as sources of data, and that data is gathered through various approaches termed 'gathering tools'. It is advisable that more than one data tool is applied in the study to ensure comprehensive crystallisation of collected data (Stewart et al., 2017). Hence, it prompted me to select individual interviews, focus group interviews, reflective journal sheets and reflective journal notes through PAR workshop sessions. To achieve the objective of the study, a discussion of the data generation methods adopted now follows.

The data were qualitatively gathered as the responses were quite descriptive and participants were motivated to speak more through follow-up questions. The data were generated in two phases, where the first one was a contextual profiling phase. This phase served as a break-through phase and was designed to locate the participants' understanding (teachers and learners) of learner democratic participation in school leadership before they were taken through the research processes. The second phase of data generation was achieved through

PAR, which was meant to stimulate learner leadership through democratic participation during workshop sessions with the learner participants.

3.9.1 Phase one of the study: Contextual profiling phase

In this phase, I attempted to elicit responses to the first three research questions in my study using interviews. This phase established a baseline of the learners' and teachers' prior understanding of student leadership involvement in school matters, as well as the level of their participation.

3.9.1.1 Interviews

The interviews provided in-depth information generation about the study when I asked the follow-up questions for clarification. Khoza and Biyela (2020) describe an interview as “a conversation between the researchers and their participants” (p. 2671). Three teacher participants who signed the consent forms were interviewed individually after school teaching hours to allow flexibility for the interviewers' daily programmes.

I chose the interview method because the participants generated first-hand data in my presence, and thus it was credible (Muzari et al., 2022). More so, the tool promoted the expression of independent views because interviewee's thoughts were not influenced by other participants. In addition, interviews enabled me to ask follow-up questions. In some instances, it gave me the chance to engage with participants more deeply to ensure understanding of the context in which the questions were asked. The participants were informed about the ethical principles before the research study began and agreed to the conditions attached to it before signing the consent forms. They further agreed to be audio-recorded with the understanding that the data would be transcribed as I could not write down the conversations while busy with the interview. Besides, the recordings would also be kept as evidence for future references. Conducting individual interviews with more than one teacher provided me with a chance to crystallise responses and address some of the concerns about power relations. It helped to avoid bias in the data generation, thus ensuring the data comprised independent thoughts.

Although the participants provided in-depth information through the interviews, George (2012) contends that individual interviews lack a dynamic synergy of interaction. For example, participants might avoid eye contact with me out of respect according to African culture, whereas looking directly into an elder's eyes implies paying attention in Western culture

(Kakilla, 2021). On that, the participants were sensitised to understand the purpose of the study and that it was only through their active interaction that the data could be generated.

Now, I will discuss the next data-gathering tool I used, which was the focus group interview.

3.9.1.2 Focus group interviews

According to Stewart (2018), a focus group interview “is a type of group discussion about a topic under the guidance of a trained moderator” (p. 687). The study intended to accommodate about 15 participants, and this group was divided into three focus groups of five participants each. Before I conducted the focus group interview, participants were informed about the ethical principles of the study, and they set further ground rules themselves.

For ethical principles adherence, clear explanations were given to the participants prior to the commencement of the study that they would be audio-recorded and photos would be taken during the interview sessions. The participants authenticated the agreement by signing the consent forms. Aligning to Yayeh’s view (2021), “the main means of data collection during a focus group discussion include audio and tape recording, note-taking, and participant observation” (p. 55). The audio-recording enabled me to avoid interjecting or disrupting the flow of conversation while talking to many participants at once. Swain and King (2022) suggest the usage of audio recordings as vital so that the interviewer may not disrupt the natural flow of conversation while talking. The interview sessions were audio-recorded and then transcribed later to uphold credibility standards.

The focus group interview enabled me to interview more participants at once. To justify this view, George (2012) posits that the use of focus groups saves time and is cost-effective compared to individual interviews. Similarly, Adler et al. (2019) express that researchers can “observe interactive discussions in which common experiences and diverse opinions are shared” (p. 11). Focus groups provided an opportunity for participants to be involved in dialogue effectively, especially in that I was present and encouraged them to discuss actively. Holding on to that, Petre (2020) indicates that leadership skills develop when learners engage through group work, taking roles both in the classroom and in groups, and flipping classrooms. Focus groups motivate learners to participate in discussions confidently as a team (Muzari et al., 2022). Passive learners may be encouraged by more confident peers in their groups, which can help reduce their introverted behaviour. Overcoming shyness among learners could enhance engagement in PAR workshops.

Besides its benefits, using focus group interviews might provide the researcher with a little control over those participants who might dominate other group participants during discussions (Sim & Waterfeld, 2019). In some cases, participants may disagree among themselves, which could mean some opinions may not be captured and, as a result, the data may be biased (Adler et al., 2019). Besides, I might be impressed by some responses that I preferred to hear from a few learners, while potentially overlooking the opinions of others, believing they all think alike. Sharing a similar sentiment, Yayeh posits that “moderators may tend to generalize or categorize individual feedback into group sentiment” (2021, p. 58), which is probably different from the views of the group majority. Since learners were discussing issues in their groups, then reporting back to the study group, they might have concealed sensitive information in the presence of others, unlike with an individual interview (Yayeh, 2021).

3.9.2 Phase two of the study: Participatory action research and workshops

3.9.2.1 PAR method

One of the best practices to find improvement in a particular situation is when the person involved is being consulted. In this study, learners expected to promote leadership in schools were the most suitable participants to examine the core issue and explore how it could be best addressed.

Therefore, a participatory research method was used to increase the self-awareness of people affected by the situation and find ways to improve it (MacDonald, 2012). In addition, PAR “takes account of researchers and participants collaborating to investigate social issues and take actions to bring about social change” (De Oliveira, 2023, p. 287).

Participants were prepared to be reflective by identifying their weaknesses regarding their democratic participation in the school leadership and envisaging the mechanisms to instil active democratic participation attitudes in the process. Ideally, phase one (contextual profiling) of the study was meant to identify the areas of concern regarding the democratic participation of senior primary learners through learner leadership and thereafter map out mechanisms to stimulate it. Petras and Porpora (1993) assert that participatory research is meant to “generate knowledge about social relations and social change more democratically by fostering dialogue and equality between researcher and researched” (p. 109). Therefore, to stimulate democratic participation among the participants, a PAR was conducted through five workshop sessions at different intervals (AR cycle). This AR drew from O’Leary’s (2004) Cycle of Research, which is framed by four steps, namely, observe, reflect, plan and act.

3.9.3.2 Participatory workshop sessions

Two meetings were conducted with the participants to inform them about the administration of the research process. Participants were taken through the research procedures to familiarise them well with the principles of the PAR workshop sessions. The workshop sessions were conducted once a week after school hours with a duration of 90 minutes per session. Child-friendly activities were held during PAR workshops, which literally promoted their desire to participate, especially through playing. We (the participants and I) proposed these activities, which might have inspired democratic participation during the PAR sessions that are detailed later in this section. I conducted some presentations on the importance of democracy in society and democratic participation to create awareness among the participants. Five PAR workshop sessions were conducted. In addition to the AR cycle mentioned earlier, I drew on the principles of the work of Lundy (2007) to guide the workshop sessions.

3.9.3.3 The Lundy model of participation

The Lundy model (see Figure 3.1) consists of four elements that provide a pathway to help conceptualise Article 12 of the UNCRC. Hence, Article 12 of the UNCRC (UN, 1990), states that “parties shall assure the child who is capable of forming his or her own views the right to express those views freely in all matters affecting the child, the views of the child being given due weight in accordance with the age and maturity of the child” (p. 5). The elements are applied into practice in their chronological order to stimulate children’s participation in decision making (see Figure 3.1).

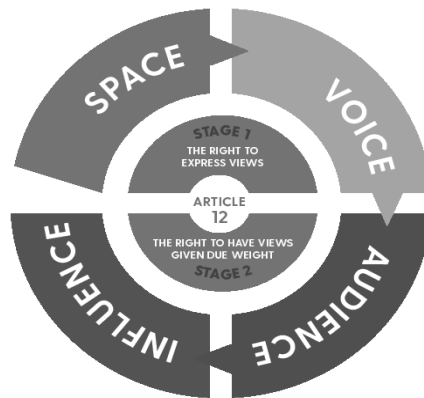


Figure 3.1: Shows Lundy model of participation (cited in Bourke & O'Neill, 2022, p. 8)

3.9.3 PAR workshop session procedures

3.9.3.1 Session one: Familiarisation with the study

This was the first PAR workshop session with the participants. The participants started by setting out the ground rules that guided the workshop sessions. Thereafter, reflection was conducted on the information provided from focus group interviews in phase one. Participants were allowed to ask questions related to the interviews that had been conducted. Later on, we discussed the meanings of concepts like leadership, learner leadership, democracy, democratic participation and learner voice. Apart from the reflection conducted, I explained how they should conduct themselves during PAR using Lundy's model philosophy (Lundy, 2007) to promote active participation. Therefore, the four basic principles were followed:

a) Space

Participants were given a *space* where they introduced themselves to each other and set up rules for themselves in my (researcher's) presence. My presence in this workshop was to guide and provide a space to participants so that they would feel free to talk. Participants developed the confidence to express themselves freely among each other in their groups and took the time they needed to adapt to the group. In relation, Hart (2008) mentions that "children also build competencies from their participation in play or work with one another, often without adults" (p. 20). I took cognisance of this during the workshop activities, where I paid attention to their views and directed them where it was necessary. Thus, Lansdown (2010) advises that "children

need access to appropriate information and to safe ‘spaces’ where they are afforded the time, encouragement and support to enable them to develop and articulate their views” (p. 12).

b) Voice

Participants were given an opportunity to engage in discussions while in their groups and then presented their work to the whole group. I facilitated and assisted them where it was needed, as advocated by Lundy (2007). Children have a right to receive guidance and direction from adults, and an opportunity for children to initiate and facilitate, supported by adults, should also be a part of the engagements (Hart, 1992; Lundy, 2007). I was aware that grouping participants did not guarantee active participation, hence, their decision not to participate was also respected (Lundy, 2007). Since the participants were informed about the study’s expectations, they were expected to encourage passive participants during discussions to avoid silence in their groups.

c) Audience

Participants were given an ‘*audience*’ and were encouraged to listen to other participants during the workshop and give due weight to their opinions when they shared views, be it in groups or individually. Participants were reminded to exercise equality in their discussions during workshop activities. Being in the groups, they learnt to listen to each other when one is talking, respected one another’s ideas, avoided laughing at one another, and, rather, appreciated others’ contributions. Therefore, Flynn (2019) asserts that the dialogue among children and adults enhances learning from each other as a result of listening to one another’s voices.

d) Influence

Their thoughts were ‘*influenced*’ by others and acted upon, or else rejected with motivation. During the workshop, participants were urged to share their views, which would either be supported or rejected, especially before they reported to the whole group. Percy-Smith and Thomas (2010) indicated that children have the right to express their views freely, however, consideration should be taken into account based on their age and maturity. This is important in democratic participation because some participants may withdraw from participation if their views are not accepted or supported. Hence, the training stressed that they would oppose each other sometimes and eventually decide on what to agree on during role plays, word puzzles and so forth in upcoming workshop sessions.

I further informed them that for every session there would be an activity to be carried out, and there would be a reflection with all participants for possible future changes.

3.9.3.2 Session two: Observing and reflecting

In the second session, we played some audios from the focus group interviews that were conducted. Participants were asked to reflect by comparing how different focus groups understood the key concepts of leadership, learner leadership, learner voice, democratic participation and democracy. They also compared their current understanding to their initial responses during phase one (contextual profiling). They discussed in their focus groups, then reported back to the whole group. This was to make sure that they had a good understanding of the concepts prior to the commencement of the PAR activities.

3.9.3.3 Session three: Planning

After sensitising the learners to the purpose of the study, I felt satisfied that they were able to describe leadership in a general sense and leadership in the context of the study. This made it easier for them to align their ideas with the four basic concepts (space, voice, audience, and influence) that advocate democracy and learners' participation as indicated by Lundy (2007). Thereafter, I felt it was appropriate to suggest child-friendly activities that enhanced whole-child participation where playing is involved. The activities that were considered were; video plays (child rights and democracy), completing word puzzles and role play.

3.9.3.4 Session four: Implementation

This session was conducted on three different days over three weeks. Each week a single activity was conducted, and participants were assigned to report back to the rest of the groups. Thereafter, participants were expected to write their reflections in their groups, including how they engaged with one another while working on the activity. Learners were expected to reflect on their progress after every PAR session in terms of sharing their views, listening to others' views (audience), and supporting each other (influence) to enhance their participation in their focus groups.

Activity one: Video clips on child rights

Two short video clips were played from YouTube that addressed children's rights in society. The aim was to acquaint them with the knowledge and understanding of their rights as children before they engaged in the study. The YouTube video, *What is democracy for kids?* (Learn

Bright, 2020) described democracy as “...when every member of society speaks out their opinions and decisions are taken on the majority votes”. It further expresses: “It is when children have the right to express their opinions to the teachers or their parents”. The second video, *UNCRC overview public* (Education Scotland, 2021) emphasises that “Article 12 promotes the respect for views of the child, and schools should integrate children and younger people’s rights into every aspect of decision making, policy and practices”. I believed that once the participants knew their rights, they would be free to participate with confidence without being intimidated by anybody, and this created a space for them. After they watched the clips, they discussed their rights and whether they were being practised and respected in the school. They were given posters to jot down their feelings and thereafter report back to the whole group.

Activity two: Completing a word puzzle

I distributed three different papers among the focus groups randomly. The participants in each focus group were given 10 minutes minimum to complete the word puzzle; however, they were allowed to go beyond the given time. Participants were expected to consider others’ voices, listen to them and give them space to think and ask questions while interacting. Thereafter, similar word puzzle papers were given to all groups in order to follow. Then, the participants presented their feedback to the whole group, and all focus group members were expected to take part during the presentation. The rest of the group reflected on their presentation, focusing on democratic participation among the members, regardless of being right or wrong.

Activity three: Role play on capturing the best school leadership practices

In the previous session, the participants proposed another social activity that they wanted to carry out during their next session. They decided to organise role plays on three different schools and their leadership styles. Each group was constituted with a head learner as a school principal, and the rest represented learners. One group depicted democratic leadership, another group authoritarian leadership and the last one laissez-faire leadership. After the role play, participants engaged in a discussion of each group’s role play, commenting on the benefits and disadvantages of each school leadership style. Their discussions were grounded on the stimulation of democratic participation among the participants in their respective schools. They reasoned about the advocacy of democracy and were able to determine the school that best promoted learner leadership among the three. During the discussion, they were further guided

by Hart's ladder of participation, as they needed consultation and directives from adults to enable them to make informed decisions.

3.9.3.5 Session five: Reflection

This was the last part of the PAR cycle. Despite the activity-based reflections conducted earlier, participants were assigned to reflect on the whole workshop programme. They were given between 20 and 30 minutes to write down broad reflections and thereafter were given a chance to report back to the group. Each group presented their views about the whole PAR workshop, and they were allowed to compare how different groups expressed different feelings.

3.9.3.6 A reflective journal

Participants used reflective journaling to capture what was taking place during the workshops and throughout the study. Ortlipp (2008) describes a reflective journal as a strategy that facilitates reflection where researchers and participants talk about themselves and the choices, assumptions and decisions they made during the research process. Defined from a classroom perspective, Baresh (2022) said that reflection is a means of writing by students about classroom experiences to improve a certain area. A journal sheet with guiding questions was given to participants in their groups to reflect on the progress made during the workshops.

The reflective journal sheet was used throughout; however, participants also reflected on the progress made based on their previous sessions' reflection experiences. Focus groups were given opportunities to read to the whole group about their reflections and how they progressed in their individual groups. Reflective journaling is beneficial in the sense that it enhances self-reflection thinking, creativity and professional practice development, among others (Baresh, 2022). I found the reflective journal suitable as the participants determined their interactions among themselves in their own groups, and the study group was also able to reflect on how other groups engaged one another in considering democratic participation. The participants sat for five sessions and engaged in different activities aimed at promoting democracy among the groups, bearing in mind that every member was entitled to be part of the discussions and feel valued. The activities were seen to be child-friendly and advocated interactions. For instance, in the first sessions, they presented their work on posters, which they did collectively.

Likewise, I reflected on what transpired during the workshops and took notes in my journal book for every session conducted. I reflected on their engagement, interaction, confidence and so forth. By reflecting on each workshop, it enabled me to compare the participants' feelings during the sessions. Besides, participants' photos were taken in the process to uphold the credibility of the study. This was ethically agreed upon by the participants before the research study was conducted.

3.10 Data Analysis

Data analysis is “a process of making sense of data” (Merriam, 1998, p. 178). The data was gathered from participants through different data-gathering methods, namely, individual interviews, focus group interviews, reflective journal sheets and reflective journal notebooks. The data were analysed through thematic analysis using inductive and deductive processes. Inductive analysis refers to “when codes are used to label the data developed during the process of coding, based on the actual content of the data set” (Vears & Gillam, 2022, p. 113). According to Lester et al. (2020), “a code is simply a short, descriptive word or phrase that assigns meaning to the data related to the researcher’s analytic interests” (p. 100). The data were analysed using Lester et al.’s (2020) seven-step data analysis process. The responses provided by the participants were analysed and categorised for their commonality, followed by sub-categories that eventually generated themes. On the other hand, the study also adopted a deductive data analysis approach. According to Braun and Clarke (2021), in deductive analysis, “existing research and theory provide the lens through which we analyse and interpret data” (p. 331). Therefore, to answer the first three sub-questions in phase one, I adopted an inductive analysis process. To remind the reader, the questions are as follows:

1. How is the notion of learner democratic participation perceived within the school?
2. What activities do learners lead at the school?
3. What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?

The first-hand data generated from interviews (individual interviews and focus group interviews) were compared to find concepts that formed patterns. The frequency of the emerged concepts in the patterns was developed into themes and sub-themes (Lester et al., 2020). These themes were not predetermined by a particular theory; hence, they emerged from the participants' responses. The concept of group dynamics, a composition of Kurt Lewin's field theory, was drawn upon during the group focus interview process. This brought in the

deductive analysis technique because I also based my analysis on the group dynamic perspective. In addition, relevant leadership literature and theory was drawn upon to link to the study findings.

Moving on to phase two, PAR was used through workshop cycles to answer the sub-question:

4. How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

The data were abductively (inductively and deductively) analysed. From the literature perspective, abduction “refers to an inferential creative process of producing new hypotheses and theories based on surprising research evidence. A researcher is led away from old to new theoretical insights” (Timmermans & Tavory, 2012, p. 170). With this in mind, I drew on Kurt Lewin’s field theory and categorised the data based on this during the data analysis. The participants were grouped, as suggested by Kurt Lewin’s field theory, so that change may occur in society, as group dynamics promote societal transformation more than individuals (Burnes & Bargal, 2017). The data were analysed using Lewin’s three-step model of change. Data were analysed in three stages:

- from the unfreezing stage perception of their life before the participants were engaged in the PAR process (quasi-stationary equilibrium),
- to how they were transformed when participants were involved in carrying out activities and doing reflections (movement stage), and, eventually,
- to how they adopted the new behaviour during the PAR workshop sessions (refreezing stage).

For example, children were given a ‘space’ to be ‘unfrozen’ (the first step of Lewin’s three-step model), as they might have resisted changes at the beginning due to uncertainty (disconformity is deductively analysed).

In the case of the Lundy model, the data gathered during the workshops were further categorised under these four elements, where the progress made is assessed. For instance, on ‘space’; the current participation by participants would be compared to the previous discussions if there were notable improvements in their interactions. Presumably, new themes might have emerged from the data, and this would be inductively analysed.

The Hart (1992) ladder of participation (see Figure 3.2), which conceptualises Article 12 of UNCRC was also used to analyse the data in regard to Question 4 above.

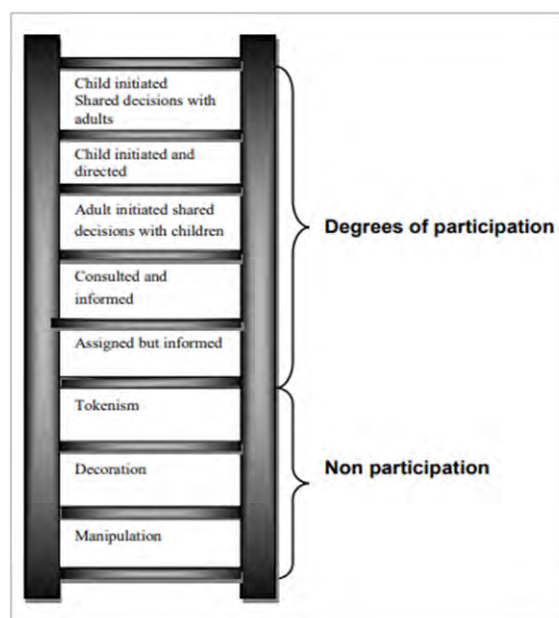


Figure 3.2: Represents the ladder of participation (Hart, 1992, p. 8)

The model promotes the stimulation of dialogue in children with parental participation (Hart, 1992). Mncube (2008) expresses that participation is “an inclusion/involvement of all stakeholders in the governance of schooling considers power relations among adult governors and learner governors” (p. 79). In terms of analysis, this model assisted in categorising learner participation during the workshops. It was useful to analyse the extent to which learners were involved in decision making, as highlighted in the figure above. Kurt Lewin’s work enhances transitional changes of individuals in society, whereas Hart’s ladder enhances the participation of children according to different levels. Both theories imply that a change should start somewhere. For instance, Lewin’s work starts with unfreezing, where people are sensitised to accept changes, and Hart (1992) starts with manipulation, as children should first be taken through before they are involved in the process.

The Hart model has its shortcomings. According to McAuley and Brattman (2002), cited in Moules and O’Brien (2012), the model is linear and lacks connection among the levels of participation (p. 19). In response, Malone and Hartung (2010) cited Hart (1997) in claiming

that it does not imply children should always be operating at the highest rung. According to these authors, a child may work at whatever level they choose, at any stage of the process (p. 28). The model is further criticised for “not acknowledging the different degrees to which children and young people can be involved in participatory activities” (p. 18). Moules and O’Brien (2012) reiterate that the model is open to suit individuals’ situations and should not be generalised.

In summary, the data were inductively and deductively analysed drawing on Kurt Lewin’s field theory (using the three-step model of change: (i) unfreezing, (ii) moving, and (iii) refreezing) and the Lundy model. In addition, Hart’s model and leadership literature were drawn on to discuss the findings.

3.11 Trustworthiness

Trustworthiness refers to the set of criteria that validate the quality of qualitative research (Lemon & Hayes, 2020). According to Connelly (2016), trustworthiness in qualitative research is conceptualised by credibility, dependability, confirmability and transferability.

The study was *credible* as the consistency was maintained in the findings with reality (Stahl & King, 2020). To achieve that, I maintained continued engagement with the research participants through different activities during PAR workshop sessions and reflective journaling (Connelly, 2016). Data were gathered through various data collection methods, while some data collection methods were not suitable at all (Korstjens & Moser, 2018). Doing so facilitated a wider comparison of data from various participants, which may result in meaningful crystallisation. Stewart et al. (2017) describe crystallisation as when data are informed by multiple truths from thick descriptions from various data generation methods rather than on a single truth of thin descriptions. In this regard, I used different kinds of participants and data collection tools in the study to promote credibility.

The study further reflected *dependability*, as findings provided by both teachers and learner participants were consistent and could be repeated through other data-gathering methods (Amankwaa, 2016). I ensured that I followed the right methods to gather data in a qualitative study through interviews and reflective journals to maintain the consistency of the findings.

Findings were *confirmable* since evidence of the research process findings could be possibly generated by other researchers because of their consistency, and the findings are also compared to research conducted earlier (Connelly, 2016). I kept the interview records, field notes in my journal book, photos taken during workshops and audio records for interviews. Thus, I safeguarded the authenticity of the findings and retrievable evidence.

Lastly, the study is *transferable*. Stahl and King (2020) argue that transferability is present when “a thick description provides a rich enough portrayal of circumstances for application to others’ situations” (p. 26). In like manner, Korstjens and Moser (2018) describe it as a thick description of data from participants regarding the research process and context of the study will enable a researcher to transfer their findings to their own setting. For example, using a variety of data generation methods in the study, like individual interviews, focus group interviews and reflective journals, enabled me to obtain a thick description to widen its application to other researchers. Lastly, repeated PAR sessions were conducted to strengthen the trustworthiness of this study through prolonged engagement among the learners to observe consistent findings (Muzari et al., 2022).

3.12 Ethical Considerations

Ethics are moral attitudes that researchers should bear in mind when interacting with participants. According to Elicor (2022), “Ethics refers to certain codes of conduct enacted by an external body, such as the institution with which one is affiliated, profession, or workplace” (p. 3). I requested permission or approval from relevant organisations to conduct the study at the school before starting the research. The study involved human participants, who were expected to interact in data generation; hence, ethical considerations regarding the study were required (O’Leary, 2004).

3.12.1 Ethics clearance and Gatekeepers’ permission

After receiving the clearance certificate from the Rhodes University Ethics Clearance Committee in May 2023, which legitimated the study, I wrote to the school board chairperson and to the regional director requesting permission to conduct the study at the school. I requested permission from these supervisors since I am the school principal. Both the chairperson and regional director approved my request to conduct the study (see appendices). Thereafter, the

staff members were informed that a study was approved and would be conducted in the school, and some details were given to them about the research.

3.12.2 Participants' consent and voluntary participation

Participants were given clear explanations about what the study required of them. Sim and Waterfeld (2019) maintain that “consent is a central ethical concern in research using human participants” (p. 3004). Even though teachers were informed separately, they were further urged to join the learners during the dissemination of the information about what the study entailed. They were informed about the clearance certificate and gatekeepers' permissions, which had approved that the study be conducted in the school. The study ethics were also read to them, and thereafter the learners that were interested in participating were asked to collect consent forms. This was voluntary participation, and uninterested participants were free to leave the study anytime. In reiteration, Muzari et al. (2022) indicate that “the consent of the participants to partake in the study is valued and even when they feel like discontinuing in contributing to the study, the respect of such a decision is guaranteed” (p. 19). Learner participants collected the assent forms and then took them to their parents for their approval in order to take part in the study. Learners whose parents signed the assent forms were finally deemed legitimate research participants.

3.12.3 Anonymity

Anonymity is generally a concealment of someone's or some institution's identity to the public who are not research participants. According to Muzari et al. (2022), “There is need to provide anonymity through avoidance of using the participants' names or an identity that can lead to their recognition by any other persons besides the researcher” (p. 19), which is similar to the argument expressed by Arifin (2018). Therefore, participants were called by their name labels (i.e. learner A, B, C, D, etc. and teachers as T1, T2, T3). Anonymity maintains the integrity of the researcher and avoids the possibility of harm to researchers and participants (Elicor, 2022). For that reason, the participants' faces were blurred from the public domain in photographs and the research site's authentic name was concealed to protect participants from being recognised (Nduna et al., 2022). As mentioned, participants' photographs were blurred for anonymity reasons, and they are presented in the findings chapter.

3.12.4 Confidentiality

Confidentiality involves safeguarding the identities of those involved in the study from potential harm, be it personal or institutional (Bertram & Christiansen, 2020). Sim and Waterfeld (2019) define confidentiality “as what is done with the information once it is in the researcher’s possession, and specifically the extent to which it is disclosed to others” (p. 3008). I informed the participants that the information shared in the study was only meant for academic purposes and nothing else. They were also empowered not to allow any person or outsider who might be tempted to observe them unless they agreed to that. Finally, they were advised not to divulge our discussions to non-participants in order to protect themselves from harm. Participants could have been harmed through intimidation, embarrassment and distress by their focus group members and anybody else (Sim & Waterfeld, 2019).

3.13 Conclusion

In summary, the methodology chapter provided an overview of the research processes that were followed in the study by explaining the methods used in data gathering. In addition, it addressed various components of the research, such as the research paradigm, research design, sampling procedures and so forth.

In the next chapter, I present and discuss the data gathered during the study.

CHAPTER FOUR: DATA PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The chapter focuses on the presentation and discussion of the data gathered during the two phases of the research study. The two phases ‘contextual profiling and PAR’ were conducted to generate data in response to the overarching question of the study: *“How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?”*. First, I held individual interviews with the teacher participants and a focus group interview with learners (phase one: contextual profiling). In this regard, data were generated to elicit answers to the following sub-research questions:

1. How is the notion of learner democratic participation perceived within the school?
2. What activities do learners lead at the school?
3. What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?

Second, I conducted phase two ‘PAR’ with learners who are the main research participants in the study to elicit responses to the question: *“How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?”* Data were generated through learner reflective journaling and researcher reflective journal notes during the PAR workshop sessions.

4.2 Coding of Participants

Research participants were coded to uphold ethical considerations and conceal the identities of participants from whom data was solicited (Muzari et al., 2022). For example, Teacher Interview A is coded T1. The following codes for participants were used as shown in Table 4.1.

Table 4.1: Coding of participants

<i>Research tools</i>	<i>Codes</i>
<i>Individual Interview (with teachers)</i>	
Teacher interview A	T1
Teacher Interview B	T2
Teacher Interview C	T3
<i>Focus Group Interview (with learners)</i>	
Focus group one	FG1
Focus group two	FG2
Focus group three	FG3
<i>Participatory Action Research Workshop Sessions (with learners)</i>	
Session one	S1
Session two	S2
Session three	S3
Session four	S4
Session five	S5
<i>Reflective Focus Group Journal Sheet (with learners)</i>	
Reflective journal one	RGJ 1
Reflective journal two	RGJ 2

Reflective journal three	RGJ 3
<i>Researcher Reflective Journal Note</i>	
Journal note one	JN1
Journal note one	JN2
Journal note one	JN3

My attention now turns to the discussion of the findings about how learner democratic participation is perceived in the school. Data was generated from individual and focus group interviews.

4.3 Participants’ Understanding of Learner Democratic Participation in Schools

The main purpose for undertaking the study with the participants was to stimulate democratic participation towards developing learner leadership in senior primary learners. Based on the literature, Ottander and Simon (2021) indicate that “there is no simple definition of democratic participation, as it can take different forms depending on how it is addressed in different teaching traditions” (p. 1897). The discussion below captures the participants’ perceptions of learner democratic participation in schools.

4.3.1 Learner Democratic Participation: A platform where learners have freedom of expression

Evidence from the data revealed that some participants felt that learner democratic participation prevails when learners are given the freedom to express their views on school daily programmes. During the interviews, a participant pointed out that democratic participation is “*when a learner is involved in certain activities by his/her own choice*” (T2). Besides, “*everyone has a choice to do what he/she likes to do or not*” (T2). In the same vein, another participant expressed that “*it is when learners are given freedom to participate*” (T3). Responses from the participants emphasised ‘freedom’ a key concept which enhances learner democratic participation in school leadership. Hence, democracy represents freedom of voice for learners to bring changes in their schools. Their views aligned with the literature, as Kasimi

(2020) states that democracy is premised on shared views through various approaches that intend to promote freedom to human beings. Moreover, the manifestation of democratic participation in the schools is observable where learners do things of their own choice: *“Democracy means doing something from your own heart where you do it freely”* (T2). Holding on to that view, another participant recognised that *“this is when learners are free to participate in everything which is happening at the school”* (T3). In essence, learner leadership is enhanced through individuals’ free will to engage in school matters. Relating to that, literature equally expresses that democracy is conceptualised by choice of learners where they take control of such choices to guide their educational goals (Cam et al., 2022). In a similar vein, Akudo (2020) defines democracy as when a leader “encourages people’s participation in policy formulation and implementation in the school” (p. 297). In essence, learners are expected to initiate ideas when participating in school matters other than being listeners to what their teachers think. Therefore, a proactive dialogue between the learners and teachers is ultimately important in decision-making processes. Subsequently, this translates to learners being given a choice without coercion from the teachers, a gesture of democracy in school leadership. Arguably, teachers should see to it that learners are motivated to express their feelings freely to enhance their confidence.

4.3.2 Legitimising learner voice: A portrayal of democratic participation in leadership

Some participants revealed that democratic participation in learner leadership can be observed when learners’ views are considered and supported by their teachers during decision-making processes. A participant expressed her observation:

Let me say we do not have swings at school and a certain learner may come up with this idea, the teachers or principal should consider this idea and put it into practice. By this, the learners will feel that our voice is also be heard. (T1)

Participants felt that they were obliged to make decisions appropriately and expected their teachers to advise them when required. Literature by Lundy (2007) similarly suggests that learners are required to express their views in the presence of adults whenever they are given the opportunity to do so. Most importantly, they would be eager to participate if their views were considered by their adults. Participants felt democratically involved in school matters when their views were supported. Referring to this, Participant A observed that *“some teachers ask us when we want to write the tests. Some teachers use to extend the deadline especially on*

subject projects if we did not finish” (FG2). In addition, a participant thought that learners should be involved in the following: *“Setting up class rules so here learners should also be allowed to give their points of what they think the rules should be and not the teachers to come up with all the rules”* (T3). This implied that learners’ views were considered by their teachers through dialogue, although not in all school issues in some instances. Thus, Duramy and Gal (2020, p. 2) express that, participation involves “ongoing processes, which include information-sharing and dialogue between children and adults based on mutual respect, and in which children can learn how their views and those of adults are taken into account and shape the outcome of such processes”. This resonates with Burnes and Bargal (2017) who view democracy as a practice where leadership is built on collective group views where all members of a society are expected to demonstrate self-responsibilities, respect for human rights and fairness for everyone.

Most participants suggested that when learners take part in the decision-making process, they are likely to bring changes in the school welfare: *“In case of the school here, the learners are also needed to be taking part in decision making that will improve the school”* (T1). Doing so, I feel it may promote opportunities where teachers and learners can listen to each other and eventually agree on a particular situation. Thus, Guzman (2022) maintains that involving learners in school leadership and “encouraging them to make decisions and propose ideas for school change are essential, giving them a sense of ownership and responsibility” (p. 52).

4.3.3 Level of autonomy as enablers of learner democratic participation

In this section, participants expressed two views which are contradictory to each other. They revealed that they were not given full autonomy in leadership due to adults’ control. On the other hand, they recommended adult involvement as a crucial agent for learner leadership development in school. Therefore, I presented this section considering the levels of autonomy in providing an understanding of the concept. The extent to which this is prevalent in the study will be discussed based on the degrees of autonomy given to learners in taking charge of leadership opportunities.

When interviewed, evidence from the participants’ responses indicated that learner democratic participation is observed when learners are given autonomy to take charge of a situation. It seemed that some participants were hesitant to participate in leadership roles because they were monitored by the teachers. Referring to literature, Woods et al. (2021), understand autonomy

as the “capability to adopt for oneself the principles, rules or values that guide one’s action” (p. 75). For example, *“the learners are supposed to be on their own, they supposed to be leading one another ... where there is no monitoring of an elder”* (T2). Similarly, Participant B expressed that *“we do not like it when teachers are following us everything that we are doing because one day they will not be around”* (FG1). These views are supported in the literature by Fielding (2001) who mentions that “participation means more than taking part in an activity organised by adults” (p. 12). In emphasis, Cam et al. (2022) mention that students who initiate something are more likely to see its importance and strive to pursue it which creates a sense of ownership. The responses indicated that participants felt that learners should take full charge of responsibilities in the school for them to be democratically involved in leadership rather than being constantly monitored. Furthermore, the feeling of being trusted and empowered in sharing views regarding leadership roles by the teachers enhances their participation. Likewise, Akudo (2020) maintains that in a democratic society where a leader “affords people a say in decisions that affect their goals and how they do their work, it drives up flexibility, responsibility and keeps morale high” (p. 299). Regarding Participant A, he felt that democratic participation is *“when someone works confidently with nobody involved in their work”* (FG2). In addition, Participant D explained that *“it is when a learner doing his/her work freely like being a class captain you are doing your work without pressure from anyone”*(FG3). In support, Duramy and Gal (2020) propose that “children’s views should be sought and listened to when children express them both as an individual and as a group” (p. 2). Sharing a similar sentiment, Nthontho (2017b) posits that student participation is “a process rather than an event, with varying degrees of involvement from being consulted on predetermined issues to them choosing their agenda, making their own decisions, and taking them forward” (p. 166). Although participants felt that learners deserve a space to be independent and own their decisions entirely, Lundy maintains that the involvement of adults will remain critical in decision processes as learners cannot make decisions entirely by themselves taking their ages and maturity into consideration (Lundy, 2018). Thus, children are expected to be listened to, but their views are still required to be given due weight by adults (Lundy, 2007).

Despite the participants' requests for autonomy, they equally recognised the assistance from the teachers which confirmed Lundy’s (2007) feelings. Referring to this view, a participant confirmed that they lacked cooperation sometimes among each other, for example: *“Let me say it is a captain of soccer player they should practice, or they should run around the sport field first and so on, but you might find them not cooperating with one another”* (T1). The

observation by participants indicated that learners cannot entirely lead themselves as they claimed for autonomy, *“Sometimes they use to be supervised by teachers maybe because when the teacher is not there, they do not do anything, and sometimes I use to see them alone there”* (T3). I could sense that, sometimes learners lacked the confidence to lead others. In this regard, Capretta et al. (2024) assert that “developing leadership skills requires not only opportunities but also guidance and practice” (p. 24). Once the learners possess confidence, that might make it easier for them to express how they feel about a situation, and this could result in free participation. Participant A mentioned confidence in learners as a demonstration of learners’ democratic participation by saying that *“when a learner feel confidence and not shy to speak in front of the people”* (FG2). This point was further supported by literature; Grant and Kajee (2023) suggest that “if learners are sufficiently interested in the new school initiative and regard it as a crucial concern, they are more likely to become engaged and remain actively involved in, and work toward, the transformation they envisage” (p. 362). Likewise, Flutter (2006) asserts that involving learners in school leadership “inspires pupils by putting them in the driving seat, giving them control and responsibility as clients” (p. 188). This is to say, that learners should be equipped with confidence so that they can confidently make informed decisions towards school reform. Yet, adults’ involvement in the learners’ programme should not be sidelined. Conclusively, Mabovula (2009) is convinced that democracy would “broaden stakeholders’ understanding of democratic participation where members would be able to listen to one another and in the process take binding decisions for the benefit of the school” (p. 224). Lastly, I contend that learners alone cannot entirely be entrusted to carry out responsibilities mainly making decisions without adults being involved based on their own observation.

In the next discussion, my attention turns to the activities that were led by primary learners to promote learner leadership development in the school.

4.4 Activities That Learners Lead at the School

Effective school leaders are expected to facilitate the successful implementation of various activities by engaging all stakeholders. Learners also constitute the composition of the school’s stakeholders and thus are equally responsible for performing tasks that promote future leaders. In line with that, Simonsen et al. (2014) assert that “student leadership development is often associated with activity participation and the extent of student engagement” (p. 203). Significantly, learner leadership evolves when learners actively participate in a variety of

school activities. Consequently, students were encouraged to identify the school activities in which they took on leadership roles. Data were generated through interviews to solicit responses to the second sub-question: *What activities do learners lead at the school?*

During the interview sessions, many participants revealed that learners participated in leading activities in the school. Based on the responses provided by the participants, it appeared that they perceived management activities as synonymous with leadership activities. This is not surprising because the literature by Bărgău (2015) also confirms that “leadership and management are terms that are frequently used interchangeably, however, they are not the same thing” (p. 182). Considering the participants’ views and the literature in this regard, I conclusively thought that these concepts appear to be interconnected yet different. According to Adair (2006), leadership is about effectiveness where leaders focus on achieving the task, building the team and developing individuals. In other words, “Leading is influencing, guiding in direction, course, action, opinions” (Bennis, 2006, p. 41). Leadership focuses on personal characteristics that influence, motivate and respect others towards the set goals as a group rather than as individuals. In fact, it aims to transform others to become successful without concentrating on individual achievement. In contrast, Grant (2009) views management as “the process which works towards the stability, preservation and maintenance of the organisation” (p. 9). Management focuses on the achievement of set goals of the organisation with minimum influence to inspire other people. In brief, leadership promotes the influence and caring of an individual’s characteristics to achieve a set goal while management promotes the achievement of set goals other than through inspiration.

Finally, I emphasise that leadership is linked to management in some way, and it can unfold relatively through management roles. Therefore, I concur with the literature authored by Simonsen et al. (2014) who maintain that “although many activities may not be focused on leadership development, there may be opportunities to address the development of student leadership development as a secondary objective” (p. 210). The participants mentioned a range of activities and further pinpointed the activities in which they served as leaders in the following discussion.

4.4.1 Spearheading the cleaning campaign activities

Based on the data, participants revealed that the learners led cleaning activities at school with little guidance from their teachers. During the activity, participants observed some leadership

qualities that developed among themselves. In this regard, a participant explained that *“I talked of cleaning campaign where learners have to go around the school to remove small plants and other things that means at least without a teacher the learners can be delegated to lead the other ones”* (T2). Similarly, Participant D explained by saying that *“when we clean the school yard we use to have someone who directs us sometimes without the teachers”* (FG1). In a sense, leadership qualities seemed evident in the learners when they influenced others to do such work irrespective of the teacher’s absence. Furthermore, two participants (A and B) indicated that they found innovative ways to conduct cleaning campaigns successfully as they explained that *“whenever they are conducting cleaning campaign activities, they usually divide themselves in groups and decide on which group does what”* (FG2). Concerning school activities, the findings by Grant (2015) reveal that it was observed from activities carried out in learner leadership clubs that *“when afforded the opportunity, learners were further able to communicate a vision and then work as a team to initiate a plan of action in response to that vision, with varying levels of autonomy and success”* (p. 105). The fact that learners had initiated some of the best ideas (such as groupings) on their own, manifested a sign of leadership qualities within their groups. Subsequently, I concur with Shikalepo and Kandjengo (2020b) who allude to leadership as *“having certain abilities to influence, innovate and motivate other learners”* (p. 44).

Besides, the participants also revealed that input from the teachers was quite helpful in carrying out tasks. For example, Participant C realised that *“during the cleaning campaign the teachers mostly tell us to go do different tasks around the school but they only come to see whether we do the work right sometimes”* (FG2). Of course, teachers are required to ensure that tasks are carried out effectively, however, they should avoid being fully involved in the learners’ activities. Thus, it is worth mentioning that learners demonstrated a sense of taking responsibility for themselves during the activities. Even though learners can lead themselves, Hart (1992) and Shier (2001) make us aware that the stimulation of dialogue is required where children need to be assisted by adults in making decisions. That means that constant interaction between teachers and learners is important since the learners will constantly require their guidance considering their maturity levels. As a result, the stage of cognitive development of learners matters in this regard in determining whether they can carry out tasks entirely by themselves or not.

4.4.2 Assuming responsibility for leading sport activities

Some participants indicated that they felt empowered by the teachers when asked to officiate as umpires during netball training after school hours. Participant B claimed that she led others: *“Especially in sport, I used to take a whistle to officiate as umpire during netball training while the teachers observing me and correcting me”* (FG1). Similarly, Participant A confirmed that he led others on the sports field: *“Yes, in sport I lead others at soccer training and fulfil what is required of us by our teachers”* (FG3). Learner participants observed that they were given opportunities to officiate at training as umpires, a role which was usually entrusted to teachers. Being in charge as officers helped them feel empowered to make decisions on the field which is likely to turn them into leaders who make informed decisions. As a result, giving learners the opportunity to participate in sports activities enhances the development of leadership qualities (Parlar et al., 2017). Similarly, the literature also indicates that students who served as officers when participating in activities were more likely to develop confidence in leadership development (Simonsen et al., 2014).

Furthermore, teacher participants also expressed their views when they reiterated that it was difficult for them to cooperate in the absence of the teachers. For example, one teacher noted the following: *“Let me say it is a captain of soccer player they should practice or they should run around the sport field first and so on but you might find them not cooperating with one another”* (T1). This means that the assistance of teachers was likely to be important to learners whenever carrying out activities because sometimes they do not collaborate well with one another. This view confirmed the notion raised by Lundy (2018) who maintains that the involvement of adults will remain critical in decision processes as learners cannot make decisions entirely by themselves, taking their ages and maturity into consideration. Likewise, Capretta et al. (2024) assert that “developing leadership skills requires not only opportunities but also guidance and practice” (p. 24), and it is natural that children learn through parents’ interactions (Hart, 2008).

4.4.3 Class monitors operating in a supervisory capacity

Class monitoring was the activity that most participants found provided the opportunity for learners to lead in the school. Some participants alleged that some class monitors were chosen by their teachers. This was confirmed by Participant A, who stated: *“We also choose the class monitors who lead us in the classrooms but sometimes the teachers are the ones choosing*

them” (FG1). Even though some class monitors were selected by the teachers, that did not affect their role as class monitors. Participant D stated: *“We have class captains who lead us in our classes even when we are making noise they use to tell us to keep quiet”* (FG2). It was evident that in some instances, learners were deprived of their right to democratic participation when selecting class monitors by the process used by the teachers. Nonetheless, these class monitors were empowered to make decisions within their respective classes irrespective of who chose them. In addition to the role of class monitors, another teacher participant said that *“class monitors are appointed to monitor cleanliness and ensure that order is maintained in the class”* (T1). Being entrusted with leadership roles in the school, learner Participant C acknowledged that *“the class captains lead themselves but sometimes the teachers use to tell them if not doing their work”* (FG2). This view highlights that being a class monitor means you are tasked with being responsible for maintaining order and are equally liable to make decisions in the classroom. Class monitors act as a supplement to the staff members in terms of supervising fellow learners in the school. Aligned with this notion, Jansen et al. (2014) regard leadership as an initiative that enables learners to develop into proactive leaders capable of making meaningful contributions to the core functions of the school.

It was evident that there was a practice of sharing responsibilities and powers in the school because both teachers and learners take charge of situations which is true democratic participation. In support, Participant A noted that *“sometimes, the teachers choose the people who would lead us during cleaning of the schoolyard. Sometimes, the learners choose for themselves who to lead us like in case of class monitors”* (FG1). Although learners should be empowered in decision-making processes, Hart (1992) and Lundy (2018) recommend that adults should maintain a dialogue with children, but that this does not disregard that children can solve problems by themselves.

4.4.4 Nurturing the school's plants as a leadership responsibility

Most learner participants revealed that watering the plants was a school activity where they led themselves. Participant C mentioned that *“when watering plants, we are told by the teacher to water the plants during the break because it is cold. From there it is only us reminding ourselves to make sure that the plants are watered”* (FG2). This indicated that even though learners were allowed to lead, teachers were there to assist them by guiding them and offering different perspectives.

However, some teacher participants revealed that the learners usually carry out the tasks successfully when they are involved. One teacher participant affirmed that *“sometimes, you tell them that today you are going to lead yourself but if you give them a day to lead themselves they will not do anything and I don’t know where the problem is”* (T1). To expand on this point in a different scenario, another teacher participant emphasised that based on her lengthy observations, *“learners do not lead themselves without a teacher, they do not go to assembly point for morning devotion before they see the teachers”* (T2). From a literature perspective, Capretta et al. (2024) express that “students can be the leaders of their own educational experiences and regular active participants in the interactions between their own parents and teachers” (p. 23). It is however unfortunate that if teachers are too involved in learners’ activities, it might cause learners to be reliant on teachers’ inputs rather than relying on themselves. Arguably, teachers should assist upon request by learners after they have exhausted all possibilities in handling problems. That is why, Grant (2015) discourages parents’ and teachers’ dominance over learners since it “causes them to become passive participants in democracy rather than leaders” (p. 95).

The participants further indicated that they felt responsible for helping others to water their plants especially when they were not around. Learner Participant C pointed out that *“if a certain learner is absent to school, we make sure that we water his/her plant”* (FG2). Not far from this view, Participant E also stated: *“I water the plants during school holidays without being told by the teachers as I am only given the keys for the gate and the watering can”* (FG2). Taking this into consideration, I believe these attitudes demonstrated some leadership qualities developed in the learners where they took responsibility for caring for the plants of their peers in their absence. Leadership is a collective responsibility towards the attainment of planned goals (Memela & Ramrathan, 2022), and learners portray this through their actions. It appeared that they had been emulating the attitudes of the adults who guided them in leadership activities all along. Hence, Holquist and Walls (2023) are convinced that “students watch adults perform tasks and gradually assume responsibility for the tasks themselves” (p. 57). Having explored different views of the participants I am convinced that leadership serves as a means to influence others to practice collective efforts for the prosperity of others in an organisation.

In conclusion, while learners' voices in school leadership were expressed through their involvement in activities, it is essential to examine how these activities contributed to their leadership development. Although the focus was on promoting democratic participation,

learners mainly highlighted the actions taken in leading activities, rather than reflecting on their freedom in decision making. This suggests that while they were engaged in leadership roles through activities, this fostered genuine leadership development required further exploration.

Having discussed the school activities in which learners served as leaders, I now turn the discussion to factors that enable and constrain learners' democratic participation at the school.

4.5 Enablers and Constraints of Learner Leadership Development

In this section, I present and discuss the answer to the third research sub-question: *What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?* In response to this question, the data were generated from the participants' feelings through interviews. Furthermore, I would like to remind the reader that this question is divided into two parts. Firstly, I solicit the answers regarding the factors that enabled learner leadership development in the school. Secondly, I present the factors that participants found to be constraints of learner leadership development in the school.

On this point, the evidence revealed that there were only a few factors that fostered learner leadership development through democratic participation opportunities. Compared to that, the data revealed that there were several factors which hindered learner leadership development.

4.5.1 Enablers of learner leadership development

The evidence from the participants' responses through the participation in activities revealed only two factors which promoted learner democratic participation in their school. However, one of the factors which is, collective decision making was discussed both as an enabling and constraining factor of learner leadership development. The participants acknowledged that there was little inclusion in leadership participation compared to the fact that they were greatly limited to leadership participation.

4.5.1.1 Motivation and recognition: Catalysts for learner leadership development

The participants' responses revealed that motivation promotes the learners' commitment towards the activities they were assigned to lead in the school. Participants indicated that they were interested in leading school activities mostly because their contribution was acknowledged by their teachers. In support, Nandasinghe (2020) indicated that the development of leadership "is encouraged through rewards, recognition, and reoriented

training” (p. 28), “Without such motivation to engage in the process of leading, an individual’s motivation to develop the capacity to lead naturally suffers” (Rosch & Villanueva, 2016, p. 51). This is confirmed by learner Participant C who said that *“sometimes, proactive learners use to be appreciated with the applause and given awards for whatever good things they do like taking part in modelling, cultural contestants and others”* (FG3). Similarly, learner Participant E recalled: *“I use to be given pens to write, book covers, and applauded during the morning assembly especially after the holidays when I took care of the plants”* (FG1). In that view, Shinana (2023) equally acknowledged that learner leaders can be motivated in various ways. For instance, in her case, learners who were involved in learner leadership were identified by a special addition to their school uniforms. Learner participants reiterated that they became interested in leading school activities when their contributions were recognised. This was echoed by Participant B who observed that *“we were motivated when we were prepared for a party after we had completed the fence work. Again, we used to be given breads and oros every Saturday at fence work”* (FG3). The sentiments shared by participants equated with Grant and Kajee’s (2023) findings, where they suggest that once learners realised that their involvement in the school was recognised, they became more interested in the school projects. Recognising learners by allowing them to use their voices promote the learners’ interest to carry out tasks confidently (Duramy & Gal, 2020). Giving another example, learner Participant E explained that *“teachers use to thank us when we clean the school, on Monday they clap hands for us during assembly”* (FG1). Speaking about the same aspect, Participant B expressed his excitement that: *“I feel motivated when teachers give us recognition awards like being good class captains, being a punctual learners, good dressing learners and so forth”* (FG2).

Apart from being recognised through rewards and recognition, participants were emotionally motivated to lead activities with adult assistance when encountering challenges. To affirm this, Participant A indicated:

I was given the power to pass orders to other players and they listened to me and followed me well with less force. However, those who do not follow, I use to report them to the teacher. Then, the teacher uses to call them the next day and talked to them. (FG3)

In conclusion, people should work together in a democratic society to achieve their goals (Mabovula, 2009).

4.5.1.2 Enhancing learner leadership development through collective decision making

Overall, the data provided evidence that learners had little impact on the decisions taken in the school. However, they felt honoured to have the few opportunities to be included in the decision-making team at the school. Participant A appreciated that they were sometimes considered, and stated in their own words that “*sometimes, the teachers use to ask us when we want to start study but not always*” (FG3). In the same vein, Participant A affirmed the view that “*some teachers ask us, when we want to write the tests. Some teachers use to extend the deadline especially on subject projects if we did not finish*” (FG2). Taking this into account, I got a sense that learners’ presence was being recognised, although not to the extent that they were consulted on every decision taken. Within this context, the literature by Ellis (2020) suggests that listening to what learners have to say, “offers opportunities for teachers to improve their practice” (p. 26). Aligned with earlier sentiments, a teacher participant said:

I can say during the autumn time when it is hot they [learners] can also say that teachers why cannot you allow us be outside since in the classroom is hot, why cannot we go study outside or why cannot we taught outside or why cannot we taught under the tree since the sheds are used to be hot, yes (T1).

When teachers listened to what learners suggested this motivated them to continue expressing what they wanted particularly within the classroom environment. In this regard, Flutter (2006) expresses that “student participation can provide a useful means of gathering information about aspects of the school environment and their influence on learning” (p. 187). With a similar view, Mncube (2009) is convinced that learners become empowered through their participation when they are listened to, consequently improving school functioning.

4.5.2 Constraints to learner leadership development

Despite the factors discussed as promoters of learner leadership development in schools, most participants indicated some constraints to learner democratic participation in school leadership. They pinpointed the factors which they viewed as the strongest hindrances which are discussed below.

4.5.2.1 The limited presence of collective decision-making constrains learner leadership development

To remind the reader, the factor of decision making is discussed as both an enabler and a constraint of learner leadership in school. While learner participants acknowledged their involvement in decision making, they also observed that they were not fully afforded democratic participation. Therefore, to achieve full inclusion in the decision-making process, certain improvements were required. Participant C recalled: *“I remember one time last year we went to discussion why are we failing tests and examinations”* (FG3). Adding to that, Participant D explained that *“teachers do not ask us to make decisions not on study you are only told that the study is on this day neither cleaning campaign”* (FG3). In practice, learners were not usually consulted before the decisions were made, thus, they were surprised to find out that some decisions were already implemented without the opportunity to give their input. In contention, Mabovula (2009) is convinced that democracy would “broaden stakeholders’ understanding of democratic participation where members would be able to listen to one another and in the process take binding decisions for the benefit of the school” (p. 224). Relating to this, teachers appear to be the ones making critical decisions, especially in some school administrative programmes such as finance (Shinana, 2023). This is likely to discourage the learners from owning the decisions taken by parents, prompting them to disregard responsibilities. To avoid this, schools should allow learners to exercise their democratic rights which might empower them to influence the decisions taken (Yukl, 2013).

To emphasise Yulk and Shinana’s views, a participant observed: *“Sometimes teachers force learners to take part in fundraising activities like in dancing competition because she/he probably took part in previous year, although they do not want to do it this current year against their will”* (T2). With a similar experience, Participant E said: *“I do not remember having sat with the teachers to discussion on certain thing, they only tell us that tomorrow you are going to do this activity like cleaning campaign without consulting us”* (FG3). Taking this into consideration, I had a feeling that participants were informed on occasion instead of being consulted. This was observed by Participant D who mentioned: *“We only agreed to what the teacher says. However, we propose that teachers should ask us first before deciding the day for conducting the cleaning campaign because sometimes it is sunny and we did not prepare the cleaning clothes”* (FG3). Similarly, the sentiment raised was affirmed by learner Participant E who indicated that *“on the study, we are told that on this day there will be study even on*

Wednesdays which is allocated to the sport day, sometimes the teachers can say today there is no sport because we are failing” (FG2).

To justify these claims with evidence, a teacher participant agreed: *“Honestly, we do not consider learners, for example, we just tell them that on Friday is a cleaning campaign and they do not even know when was this decided, we do not use to include them in some of these things” (T3).* This aligns with the literature, in which Nthonto (2017b) observed that a considerable number of South African learners were victimised from participating in decision making about their educational well-being and that their views were sometimes sidelined. Després and Dube (2020) assert that a school environment where learners’ voices are being listened to “implies rethinking established practices and authorities, decisions that were once taken by adults in silos are now discussed with learners and perhaps more importantly their inputs can result in effective transformation” (p. 3).

4.5.2.2 Cultural values: A drawback to learner leadership development

Responses from participants indicated that learners are not given enough opportunities to lead independently due to our traditional perceptions. According to the literature, in most African countries, culture has a significantly negative impact on learner democratic participation, particularly in rural communities (Msimanga, 2015). The evidence revealed a practice by teacher participants that they hardly allowed their learners to participate in school leadership. A teacher participant observed: *“Normally we teachers, at some points I neglect their opinions as I do not sit with them. But we are trying to improve on that sometimes we sit with them but not to the point that we make decisions with them” (T2).* From their viewpoint, learner Participant A maintained that *“I do not remember having sat with the teachers to discuss on certain thing, they only tell us that tomorrow is cleaning campaign” (FG1).* The practice of the teachers conforms to the literature, which states that, in some cultures, seeing a child engage with an adult is considered disrespectful to the adult (Mncube, 2012). Thus, children have to keep silent and not voice their views to be courteous and respect the adults (Hanna, 2021). Ultimately, some parents do not like to sit with children, which is predetermined by the cultural norms of their society.

In addition, Cam et al. (2022) report from research conducted regarding learner voice that “some principals feel it is not good to invite learners in issues like educator misbehaviour and

educator conflicts as these might affect the dignity of the educator towards learners” (p. 444). One teacher participant confirmed that they usually give the last word when making decisions:

We normally sit with them and tell them the final input that what is supposed to be done. For example, the rules when it comes to setting up of school rules we do not involve learners like the corrective actions to be imposed to them as it is already decided by elders. (T2)

Similarly, another teacher participant recalled that “when coming up with class rules is when they make decision with teachers so but for the rest, only teachers doing everything” (T1). This concurs with Kandjengo and Shikalepo (2021), who expressed that “learners coming from the background where learners or young people are discouraged to speak out or engage with parents may find it difficult to voice their views when elected to learner leadership structures” (p. 155). This cultural practice also opposes the view of Mangiaracina et al. (2021), who advocate that being a democratic citizen means one should be able to interact, participate and express their views. To make it worse, learner Participant D observed that learners agreed to anything that the teachers might decide, although they were not pleased with it: “We do whatever the teachers are asking for us, we do not oppose their instructions” (FG1). As a result, learners are restricted from free dialogue with adults and engaging in discussions – a hierarchical structure that is a common norm in African culture (Mncube & Harber, 2013). This signalled that “the hierarchical structure is made to accommodate ideas from top to bottom, making it harder for the custodians of schools to accommodate ideas from the bottom to top” (Shikalepo & Kandjengo, 2021, p. 43), which seemed to be prevalent in this context.

4.5.2.3 Level of autonomy afforded to learners through learner-led opportunities constrains learner leadership

The evidence from the data revealed that participants’ commitment to leading school activities is mostly enhanced when given ‘autonomy to lead’ by the teachers. According to Woods et al. (2021), autonomy refers to the “capability to adopt for oneself the principles, rules or values that guide one’s action” (p. 75). This probably influenced the views of participants that if they were trusted to lead, then the whole task would be left to them. Learner Participant C stated:

We do not like it when teachers are following us everything that we are doing because one day they will not be around. When we are cleaning the school, teachers do not need to follow us because they have to do other things in the office. (FG1)

Likewise, learner Participant D further observed that *“being used to be followed by teachers will make us not to work since we are used to that. We want to lead ourselves whenever we have a cleaning day”* (FG1). Speaking about that context, Flutter (2006) asserts that involving learners in school leadership “inspires pupils by putting them in the driving seat, giving them control and responsibility as clients” (p. 188). The literature further adds that learners are simply given a voice, which does not guarantee them full commitment towards democratic participation, resulting in learners’ disempowerment and low self-esteem (Mitra, 2018). In a nutshell, participants viewed it as important to sometimes do things on their own without the teachers as they wanted to solve their problems themselves. Supporting this idea, Grant and Kajee (2023) claim that learners become disinterested in schooling once restricted to participatory decision-making and leadership opportunities. Therefore, aiding learners should be done with caution as it might result in teacher dominance over learners and “cause them to become passive participants in democracy rather than leaders” (Grant, 2015, p. 95). However, the participants expressed mixed feelings here as they failed to specify what the teachers should assist them with and when they should not assist them. Therefore, autonomy remained a complex agenda during the discussions.

In contrast to earlier discussions, participants acknowledged that they were empowered to make decisions independently in some cases. For example, all five FG3 participants agreed that they were given full authority to control the tasks assigned to them. Similarly, Participant E noted: *“They [teachers] give us authority to lead other learners, such as bringing water for drinking in the class, ensuring they don’t make noise, or preventing them from going to the toilet without permission”* (FG2). Some participants also recognised the rationale behind their teachers' involvement. Participant D appreciated that *“they [teachers] look at what we do and make sure we do it well”* (FG1). Participant D further stressed that *“sometimes we need their help when we don’t know what to do, like in cultural training”* (FG2).

Holquist et al. (2023) support this idea, stating, “Whether students are invited to serve in this capacity or claim such authority for themselves through activist means, adults must negotiate decision making with them” (p. 729). Participants also acknowledged the importance of teacher involvement in situations involving misunderstandings or unruly behaviour. They trusted their teachers to restore order when needed. For instance, Participant E noted: *“If fellow learners are not adhering to my instructions, I write their names and submit them to the teachers to deal with, especially after study sessions”* (FG3). Similarly, Participant D shared: *“When watering*

plants, we usually do it ourselves without the teacher's involvement. However, sometimes the teacher observes to make sure the plants are watered properly" (FG3).

Smyth (2006) advocates "minimalist scaffolding" to create opportunities for leadership development in children with limited adult intervention. Reflecting on this, a teacher participant explained: *"Teachers choose class captains to monitor the classroom, ensuring it is clean and that students aren't making noise. If something happens, like a fight, it's the captain's duty to report it to the teacher"* (T1). Finally, Cam et al. (2022) conclude that students who initiate tasks are more likely to understand them, value their importance and commit to achieving them, fostering a sense of ownership. Therefore, teachers should provide students with the platform to develop leadership skills by taking the lead in school activities, helping them feel ownership over their achievements.

The question of autonomy in decision making within leadership roles remains somewhat ambiguous. However, learners generally felt that having space to manage tasks they are capable of handling promotes their democratic leadership development. Teachers should grant them this space to cultivate leadership skills, while also offering support when they face challenges.

4.5.2.4 Age viewed as a precondition for learner leadership development

Participants indicated that learners were largely delegated certain activities based on their level of maturity and age. In agreement with the above idea, Duramy and Gal (2020) considered the rights of children and asserted that children who are free to express their views should be given a space to do so and be assured that their views are considered due to their ages and maturity. A teacher participant observed a similar practice and stated:

At our school, grade 1 to 4 learners we consider them as small children while 4 to 7 learners are the one that are big. Most activities that we hold at our school we have to consider the big ones....We do not really consider them [grade 1 to 4] due to age differences and disregard the options to young ones. (T2)

The point of assigning leadership tasks to older learners was further contemplated by learner Participant E, who argued that *"we think leadership will start from the age of seven when we start with grade 1"* (FG2). In terms of the literature, Yu and Shay (2022) maintain that age differences in hierarchical structures contribute to learners being discriminated against based

on cultural beliefs that stop them from expressing their views in decision-making processes. In addition, the sentiment was supported by a teacher participant:

Even teachers for you to be like leading others these things start from grass root levels because if you do not start from the grass root level it will be hard for you to be on your own once you grow up, again you would want be someone behind you again. (T1)

To elaborate, another teacher noted that “*smaller learners are simply ignored compared to older learners in terms of taking leadership roles in the school*” (T2). In agreement with this view, Nthontho (2017a), assumes that “ideally, age tends to be the main yardstick the society uses to ascertain who should and who should not enter into decision-making forums” (p. 4). The literature further maintains that children and parents should collaboratively share views in making decisions, hence, “it is unrealistic to expect them suddenly to become responsible, participating adult citizens at the age of 16, 18, or 21 without prior exposure to the skills and responsibilities involved” (Hart, 1992, p. 5). Like Hart (1992), a teacher participant claimed that “*even sport coaches and teachers who are considered leaders in schools, they have started long way back to find themselves where they are now*” (T3). This is to say, learner participants believed that leadership is not supposed to start with older learners but rather younger learners from grade 1, thus, they felt robbed of the opportunities to develop into future leaders.

It has been suggested that when learners become involved in democratic participation from a young age, they are more likely to become future leaders (Mncube, 2008). However, a teacher participant noted that this dream was being ignored by “*parents who undermine the children through denying them leadership responsibilities because they always fail to accomplish them at the end*” (T1). In addition, Shinana (2023) expressed her doubts about the school context that “perhaps school authority excludes learners from crucial decision making because adults do not trust learners due to their maturity” (p. 48) for fear they might divulge sensitive issues.

From a different viewpoint, some teacher participants felt that learners who did not take up leadership initiatives could be influenced by the way they were brought up at home. Supporting this, a teacher participant had this to say: “*I think by disregarding leadership activities might be mainly caused by their upbringing their childhood they were not trained to be on their own from home because the parents sometimes might say they are children*” (T1). The practice of sidelining young learners regarding leadership roles is not only common at home but also carried into schools. Learners’ fear of undermining authority and the lack of time and

motivation from teachers are among the constraining factors that inhibit learner leadership development in schools (Conner, 2022). Therefore, denying young learners a space to be involved in school matters such as decision making might cause setbacks for learner leadership emancipation.

4.5.2.5 Low self-esteem and lack of accountability in learner leaders

The evidence revealed that learners did not show the proper commitment to anything they did as expected. However, the evidence revealed that the learner leaders were sometimes able to keep order in their classrooms, yet, in most cases, failed to maintain it. Speaking from the perspective of a class monitor, learner Participant E indicated that sometimes they kept good order in the class: *“When I tell them [learners] to collect books they sit down and listen to me”* (FG1). However, there were cases where learners were disrespectful to them. Some learners did not participate in the given activities, for example, a teacher participant noted: *“There was a cultural heritage at the school where grade 7 learners assigned to train other grades, yet, they did little and failed the event”* (T1). Besides not taking leadership responsibilities seriously, the same teacher observed that *“some individual learners supervise others but the majority [class monitors] just want someone to be behind them”* (T1). Although learners were offered the chance to lead through some school activities, they mostly did not display their full commitment towards leadership development. This resulted in the failure of the initiatives and events, necessitating teacher supervision. The lack of confidence in learners is condemned by Grant and Nekondo (2016, p. 23) who “argue that confidence is central to the development of learner voice and leadership”; hence, it should be restored. Regarding confidence restoration, a teacher participant affirmed:

Yes, they are fully supervised by teachers because sometimes we have class captains in those classrooms and they supposed to maintain orders. Sometimes you find these class captains involved in the noise-making. Therefore, teachers are also involved in those learners that are given jobs to do. (T2)

Referring to T2's view, Kandjengo and Shikalepo (2021) believe that a lack of confidence makes it difficult for learner leaders like class monitors to control misbehaviours from fellow learners unless they seek assistance from their teachers. In some cases, learners who lack confidence may refuse to take responsibility. For instance, a teacher participant recalled that *"at sport, the learner knows how to play a certain kind of sport, then you have to force him to be part of the team"* (T3). This simply suggests that learners were assigned numerous leadership roles, but it would have been in vain without the teachers' intervention. Subsequently, low confidence in learners might aggravate teachers' denial of leadership development (Fielding, 2001).

Data further revealed that sometimes learners waited for their teachers' involvement in their activities because they doubted their confidence. In support, a teacher participant expressed: *"For you to be a good coach you need to be active and you need to be confidence in yourself so saying what you think so doing what you think is right"* (T1). For one to become a leader, they should be self-motivated to accomplish the tasks assigned to them. Hence, confidence would promote their interest in leading activities. A teacher participant explained: *"So, sometimes you tell them that today you are going to lead yourself but if you give them a day to lead themselves they will not do anything.... They are committed whenever the teacher is around"* (T3). Conclusively, a teacher participant felt convinced that there is no leadership in these learners *"because here everything they just want every decision to be made by someone for them to carry it out to be simple"* (T1).

4.5.2.6 Peer pressure hampered learner leadership development

Participants expressed that a lack of respect from fellow learners contributed to poor democratic participation towards learner leadership in the school, especially when teachers were absent. Participant D indicated that *"there are some learners who use to intervene in our jobs which we are entrusted to lead, and this does not feel good with us"* (FG3). Likewise, Participant D noted that *"some few learners do not listen to what we are telling them and they talk back to the class monitors"* (FG2). It was also observed by Participant D, who expressed that learner leaders were demoralised by fellow learners when they ignored their orders. For instance, one learner participant explained: *"I can be a class captain where I repeated asking the fellow learners to keep quiet but they are still continuing making noise, this attitude also discourage me as a class captain"* (FG3). Participant A added: *"Sometimes I make an unpleasant comments that what kind of class captain are you if you cannot carry out simple*

tasks” (FG3). This clearly proved that some learners were not committed to honouring others by how they interacted while carrying out leadership tasks, hence, Participant E stated: *“They can even say we are not their teachers”* (FG2).

This is what Kandjengo and Shikalepo (2021) call ‘peer pressure’ – a phenomenon where learner leaders’ behaviour is influenced to conform to their fellow learners’ behaviour, providing them a space to manipulate them. A teacher participant noted the following: *“Let me say it is a captain of soccer player they should practice or they should run around the sport field first and so on but you might find them not cooperating with one another”* (T1). Another teacher participant reiterated: *“In most cases you only find them warning themselves to keep quiet upon seeing a teacher approaching their classrooms. They only do so because the teacher is coming”* (T2). Besides, it was not only learners that discouraged learner leaders but teachers as well: *“Sometimes when dancing in cultural rehearsing, the teachers shout at you what kind of dancing style is that ... it is discouraging”* (Participant D, FG2). Shinana (2023) highlights that the fear of making mistakes, their appearance and being laughed at by their peers declines their participation, resulting in relinquishing their leadership positions. Conclusively, learners are not fully respected by both teachers and learners, according to the evidence revealed by the data.

4.6 The Participatory Action Research Workshop Sessions

4.6.1 Introduction

This section addresses how PAR contributes to the democratic participation of learners for emancipating learner leadership in the school. It also presents the constraints towards effective learner leadership development that surfaced in the school. Furthermore, it discusses various techniques implemented to overcome these constraints by transforming the learners to unleash their leadership potential.

According to De Oliveira (2023), PAR “takes account of researchers and participants collaborating to investigate social issues and take actions to bring about social change” (p. 287). In line with PAR’s conviction as a subset of AR, it is maintained that the participants in a research study should mainly involve those affected by the situation (MacDonald, 2012). Therefore, the PAR method that was employed included the affected participant learners and addressed the constraints regarding democratic participation in the context of their school. In

addition, Petras and Porpora (1993) assert that “participatory research attempts to generate knowledge about social relations and social changes more democratically by fostering dialogue and equality between researchers and researched” (p. 111). Consequently, this prompted the conducting of PAR workshop sessions to enable the learners to engage in problem-solving themselves under my facilitation and seek mechanisms to transform themselves into becoming active democratic participants in their school society. In this regard, Reason and Bradbury (2008) believe that the participatory process brings about change in matters that concern certain individuals and their communities. Employing the PAR workshop sessions enabled me to solicit answers to research sub-question four:

How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

The data were generated from five PAR workshop sessions that were conducted. The first two sessions (S1 and S2) were intended to familiarise the participants with the study. The PAR sessions were conducted following Kurt Lewin’s (1946) change field theory using the three-step model of change (cited in Cummings et al., 2016), O’Leary’s (2004) cycle of research and Lundy’s model of child participation (2007). Since the participants indicated the challenges they encountered concerning leadership opportunities through democratic participation, this seemed to be a good platform to bring about change.

4.6.2 Unfreezing step

The first two sessions were meant to prepare participants to break their present habit of being reluctant to engage in school leadership activities and equally express their views, especially during decision making. Therefore, to stimulate democratic participation among the participants, participatory child-friendly activities were conducted through five workshop sessions at different intervals (AR cycle). The workshop sessions were planned in relation to the five spiral steps: *planning*, *action*, *process* and the *outcomes* that are predetermined by ongoing *self-reflective cycles*, which are understood to influence the research process (Kemmis & McTaggart, 2005).

This unfreezing step was intended to destabilise the present behaviour among primary school learners to become democratic participants once they accepted that there was a need for change and new social behaviours were required (Burnes, 2020). Learner participants were in focus

groups in order to achieve new changes which would benefit the whole group rather than individual changes, as suggested by Kurt Lewin's field theory. The study equally served to destabilise the present social behaviours of society (quasi-stationary equilibrium), especially the way teachers involved learners in democratic participation like sharing leadership responsibilities. To achieve this, the contention between the driving force towards change and the resisting force will be properly addressed where the driving force should be motivated to suppress the restraining forces of present societal behaviours (Schein, 1996). It was important for participants to acknowledge that the change was needed, only then, could the desired change take place (Hossan, 2015). Therefore, the first two PAR sessions were deliberately conducted to sensitise the participants to become familiar with the study's expectations. To implement the unfreezing step successfully, three processes needed to be considered (Schein, 1996) and they are discussed in the next section.

4.6.2.1 PAR Session 1: Familiarisation with the study

This session aimed to prepare the participants to encourage good communication with me and their focus group members to intensify the dialogue during the PAR sessions. In support, Yayeh (2021) maintains that it is arguable that "students need safe spaces in which to grow and to participate in dialogue where they can test their ideas and opinions" (p. 66). In addition, it created awareness among the participants to know the procedures of the PAR workshop sessions for their successful implementation. Participants were told to remain in their focus groups, which they belonged to during phase 1 (interview session). Being in groups provided a space for the participants to engage in short discussions, such as setting up the ground rules. Besides, they shared their concerns, which they wrote on the papers before they read them to the study group. For instance, Participant B asked, "*Since I have started the research study from the first phase of research, do I have the right to leave the study?*" (FG3). The question took us back to the study ethics, then in response, I noted, "*Yes, you are free to leave the study without anybody forcing you to*". Nevertheless, I discouraged them from doing so since we intended to solve the problems which would benefit all learners in the school. In addition, Participant A raised a concern about "*the types of activities they were going to carry out during the study*" (FG1). Then, I gave them some examples of activities which are learner-friendly participative games aligned with Lundy's idea on children's rights such as video plays (child rights and democracy), completing word puzzles and role play.

Regarding motivation, Participant D raised this question: “*Are we going to receive some rewards for joining the study?*” (FG2). This question drew the attention of many participants, and I responded that “*in fact, we are not going to conduct the study with anticipation of being awarded materially or monetary means as we discussed earlier. However, you are going to be capacitated with leadership skills*”. Since they indicated that they had a problem with the members who lacked self-esteem and accountability, they further expressed that there were members who did not show any commitment to their groups (FG3). Hence, Participant C stated:

We are talking about good leadership, hence, we have to assist them to become active like everybody else in the group. Just like you identified that you do not like what teachers are doing in the school as you equally wanted to be respected in every aspect of the leadership. (FG2)

Having discussed some concerns regarding the study, we turned to discussing the data gathered during the interviews in the second PAR session.

4.6.2.2 PAR Session 2: Observation and reflection on interviews

This session highlighted the purpose of the study, what participants needed to know and where they were heading. The audio recordings with the interview content (focus group and individual) were played with the participants’ permission. Then, participants were asked to listen to them and reflect on how different focus groups understood the key concepts, such as leadership, learner leadership, learner voice, democratic participation and democracy. It was important that they refreshed their minds about what they had answered during the focus group interviews for trustworthiness. Through reflection, participants might get a better understanding of how these concepts facilitated the promotion of democracy in school leadership. In this section, the following “unfreezing” processes are discussed: disconfirmation, induction of guilt and creation of psychological safety as facilitators towards bringing changes, which is known as the ‘unfreezing step’.

4.6.2.2.1 Disconfirmation

It is seemingly a fearful experience for individuals or groups to initiate changes and change their present social habits. In line with this view, Schein (1996) indicates that “all forms of learning and changes start with some forms of dissatisfaction or frustration generated by the data that conform our expectations” (p. 29). Interestingly, based on focus group interview

findings, participants revealed some hindrances towards achieving learner leadership development in primary school learners, namely *absence of collective decision making, levels of autonomy afforded to learners, low self-esteem and lack of accountability, cultural values, peer pressure and age limitations*. Only after identifying these resisting forces, could participants manage change (Hossan, 2015). In order to overcome these constraints, participants should accept the fact that new changes are needed, and they were willing to achieve that.

Participant C further revealed his anxiety as “*to what extent are they protected regarding their responses which affected the teachers during the interview*” (FG3). In response, I explained the following:

Everything that were are discussing during our workshops will remain in the workshop because we are not allowed to go out and share our discussions to the non-participants. More so, we are guided by the ethics which were read to you before started the study.

Similarly, Participant B indicated that “*we are afraid to talk bad about the teacher, especially that they are recorded during the focus group interview*” (FG2). For some reason, participants might be tempted to misguide me by providing incorrect information during data generation to avoid blaming the school authorities. It seemed that some participants were still afraid (frozen) to express their views to avoid hurting the teachers’ feelings. Thus, I reassured them about confidentiality and adherence to the study's ethical principles.



Figure 4.1: Participants setting up the ground rules, a component of unfreezing present habits

Sharing their concerns, Participant E expressed his discomfort with non-participant learners who allegedly teased them for having joined the study (FG3). Reflecting on that gave me a sense that a lack of confidence seemed to be a strong inhibitor in the participants' minds to overcoming challenges in leadership development. Therefore, participants were encouraged to keep their composure to achieve what they were aiming for. According to Lundy (2007), at first, learners need to be given a space to adapt to the people they are interacting with in order to develop confidence, which may enable them to express their views freely. Then, Schein (1996) advises that for participants to change, they should be prepared to accept the data generated as it is, whether positive or negative, in order to address the resisting forces successfully. Once the participants are free to express their views without threats, then they reach the 'survival guilt'.

4.6.2.2.2 Induction of guilt (survival anxiety)

Some first-time research participants might feel nervous about expressing their views confidently as active agents of change. At this stage, participants were expected to be confident in accepting reality and become less defensive in overcoming learning anxiety (Schein, 1996). In addition, participants might feel nervous initiating the change process once they admit something is wrong, which may result in them losing self-esteem (Schein, 1996). At this stage, I noticed that some participants accepted the fact that they were fully protected from any threat by the study ethics. For assurance, I asked the interviewed teacher participants if they would come to the study room to encourage them to say what they wanted. Then, I played the interview recordings for the learners to convince them that even teachers blame themselves and school authorities. Thereafter, Participant B commented, "*Then, it is not a problem to blame the school authority because even teachers spoke about what we mentioned during the interview*" (FG1). This signalled that the participants were ready to speak the truth about their feelings without feeling threatened. Having achieved this point where the participants were ready to accept the data gathered as valid and relevant so that they could map out the desired changes, they reached the step of "psychological safety".

4.6.2.2.3 Creation of psychological safety (overcoming learning anxiety)

Participants were reluctant to reveal the hindrances they observed during the interviews, which posed the threat of disregarding the data, as discussed previously. Therefore, learners were assured they could accept the data generated as it was, whether negative or positive. If

psychological safety is not fully created, learners will feel nervous, which consequently restricts the opportunities to change (Schein, 1996). Therefore, learners were prepared to accept one another through different mechanisms of team building, such as group work and one-on-one conversations with me. Lewin believes that effective group encounters where participation is highly motivated are more likely to bring change in individuals (Burnes, 2020). Having achieved the unfreezing stage, participants were now ready to face the reality of the situation during the PAR workshop sessions. Hence, they were prepared to move to the next step in the model of change – the ‘moving step’.

4.6.3 Moving “changing” step

This step transformed participants into adopting new social habits concerning learner leadership in the school. Participants were anticipated to adopt new acceptable social behaviours through the iterative approach of AR (Schein, 1996). Participants had earlier raised their concerns and their expectations from the PAR sessions and expressed their satisfaction before commencing with the PAR sessions. They also suggested some leadership roles they would engage in, such as organising fellow learners who were not research participants in conducting the morning devotions. Considering this finding, it convinced me that the moving forces towards changes in learners had outweighed the resisting forces, thus, they suggested playing a role in some school activities. Participants also started to listen to each other better and felt empowered to participate confidently during the PAR workshop sessions. Burnes (2020) quoted Lewin (1936a) and noted that locomotion is equal to movement, that is, “a change of position within a field” (p. 36). Furthermore, Burnes (2020) draws from the work of Lewin (1946) and highlights that the “purpose of action research is to allow those involved to understand and manage the process of locomotion, that is, to allow them to move successfully through their life space” (p. 40). Burnes and Bargal (2017) support Lewin’s AR, which advocates that the spiral of steps begins through repeated planning, action and reflection until the desired change is achieved, thus, the PAR sessions were repeated to promote social change. This certainly indicated that through group dynamics, the desired change was achieved; thus, participants should work together. I found my analytical tools linked well with the “Lewinian moving step”, as both Lundy’s model of participation and Hart’s ladder advocate changes by moving participants from one stage to another until they reach the point where they are capable of leading themselves, like making informed decisions. Lewin believed that the best and most effective means of bringing about change in individuals is through group encounters (Burnes

& Bargal, 2017). During this step, participants carried out three learner-friendly activities which connected them well within their groups. The participants were expected to develop a sense of considering others as democratic participants in leadership with their peers to mitigate the constraining forces.

I now turn the discussion to the mitigation of constraining forces through participatory activities during the PAR workshop sessions.

4.6.3.1 Constraining forces mitigated through PAR workshop sessions

The participants displayed an eagerness to change the constraining behaviours which existed in the school regarding learner leadership development. My role was to guide the participants to map out the best possible solutions to the surfaced constraints. Previously, they indicated that they were being intimidated by teachers; therefore, during the PAR sessions, they were capacitated with driving forces to break old social behaviours that prevented change (Burnes, 2020). Participant D revealed during the interview that “*we only agreed to what the teacher says. However, we propose that teachers should ask us first before deciding the day for conducting the cleaning campaign because sometimes it is sunny, and we did not prepare the clothes for cleaning*” (FG3). On a different note, the participants did not discuss ‘culture’ as a constraint because it was not appropriate to address it at this stage.

1. Limited presence of collective decision making
2. Levels of autonomy afforded to learners
3. Age differences
4. Low self-esteem in participants and peer pressure

The above underlying constraining factors to learner leadership development were addressed through the participatory activities, which are discussed in the next section.

4.6.3.2 Deciding on mechanisms for change

The approach to initiate change is predetermined by the participants who are directly involved in the situation (MacDonald, 2012). Therefore, participants suggested a plan of change by drawing up a plan, implementing the change plan and reflecting on the implemented plan. Participants were awakened to address the constraining forces that arose during the earlier unfreezing stage, intending to improve them for learner leadership development to occur in the school. I posed some questions to the participants during the sessions, and they responded to

them as much as possible. Equally, they asked questions and shared their ideas to address the concerns of other participants. The participants shared views on how they wished the teachers would treat them and demonstrated this among their group members and the whole research group. They discussed the hindering factors separately, as discussed below.

a) Limited presence of collective decision making

The data revealed that participants' voice was occasionally denigrated by the teachers because they were not considered when decisions were taken. Concerning the interview, a teacher participant acknowledged that *"we normally sit with them [learners] and tell them the final input of what supposed to be done. For example, when setting up of school rules we do not involve learners such as the corrective actions are imposed to them because it is already decided by elders"* (T2). To address this situation, Participant A suggested that *"we want our ideas to be listened to our group members because we all want to make decisions in our group"* (FG1). On the above view, Participant D appealed to the whole group to respect everything that they were going to discuss by saying, *"I want all of us to help one another so that we make good decisions about what we do in the school"* (FG3). By promoting learners' participation in decision making, "it improves the quality of service provision, increases children's sense of ownership and belonging, increases self-esteem, increases responsibility" (Shier, 2001, p. 115). Having listened to the participants' ideas, I got a sense that they were self-driven towards making positive changes to the situation, and this literally envisaged the smooth running of upcoming PAR activities. Participants had to agree on what the group members felt satisfied with, rather to agree on individual's views which they would all be accounted for in the end.

b) Levels of autonomy afforded to learners

Participants revealed that they did not have full control of the activities they led in the school. To remind the reader, during a focus group interview, Participant D argued that *"being used to be followed by teachers will make us not to work since we are used to that. We want to lead ourselves whenever we have a cleaning day"* (FG1). In order to achieve full autonomy, they claimed, participants have to adapt to the sense of ownership about anything they do in their group without my [researcher's] interference during the PAR sessions. Referring to FG2, a participant indicated that *"we want to fully do our tasks without your interruption, sir because we also want to see the group which has good ideas"*. Another participant emphasised that *"we are preparing for good leadership; hence, sir will just observe what we do and correct us later"*

(FG3). In support, Hart (2008) concludes that “when people recognise the rights of others to have a voice and involve them, then this, in my mind, is morally superior to children being ‘in charge’” (p. 24). This convinced me that the participants wanted to do things by themselves rather than be probed by me. In emphasis to this view, Reynaert et al. (2009) believe that “as children become more and more competent and are considered to be capable of exercising their rights autonomously, parents have to fulfil fewer parental responsibilities to support their children in realizing these rights” (p. 525). This means that giving learners the autonomy might reduce the burden of parents’ involvement in leadership activities. Conclusively, participants proposed to recognise everyone’s contribution and rotate group leaders, hence, they warned each other *to avoid the situation where some participants were always the team leaders or the secretary of the group* (FG3 & FG1).

c) Age differences

Participants demanded equality among group members during the conducting of PAR workshop sessions despite their age differences. They alluded that they did not like it when teachers disregarded them for leadership opportunities simply for being children. With support based on the interview, a teacher participant stated that “*smaller learners are simply ignored compared to older learners in terms of taking leadership roles in the school*” (T2). Sharing a similar sentiment, Participant D observed that “*it was only three of us who spoke during the interview, this time we want grade 4 and 5 participants to say something*” (FG1). Regarding this, Yu and Shay (2022) conclude that “age-based hierarchy and discrimination are deeply rooted in traditional and cultural beliefs” (p. 3). It appeared that young learners were scared to participate because they were used to their culture where children are not allowed to speak before the older ones. As a sign of motivation, Participant A suggested that “*leadership is not only for older people but children too. This is because some are class captains respectively*” (FG3). It is recommended that “research methodologies for working with young students need to be particularly attentive to those students’ contexts and their individual vulnerability because of their age” (Cook-Sather, 2020, p. 185) and should be motivated by older learners.

d) Low self-esteem in participants and peer pressure

Data gathered from the interviews revealed that the participants’ peers and low self-esteem were among the drawbacks of leading school activities. These two constraints seemed

interconnected, consequently, we discussed them together. Participants were expected to change their attitudes towards each other during group discussions through PAR sessions. In support, Participant A expressed that, *“I want to appeal to fellow learners not to call each other funny names based on what we might do wrong”* (FG2). In addition, Participant C noted that *“there is a tendency of laughing at each other like what happens in the normal classroom. Here we are doing something different, so let us respect each other’s ideas”* (FG3). To mitigate the situation, Participant B suggested that *“I [researcher] should also sensitise other learners to understand the importance of them having joined the study because other learners left earlier due to their bad attitudes”* (FG2). Thus, it necessitated the combination of different participants regarding age and capacity to find out how they were going to treat one another.

Session 3: Planning the change approaches

Participants were reminded to sustain their focus groups to enable changes among members who engage in the change process and commit to changing behaviours (Burnes, 2004). This was meant to give them enough space to adapt to their group members (Lundy, 2018). Three participatory child-friendly activities were conducted during the PAR workshop sessions in phase 2. These activities were suggested by participants with my guidance, in line with Shier’s view (2001) for indicating that “age-appropriate techniques for consulting children involving games and art activities” (p. 112). Among the proposed activities were *child rights and democracy, organise sport activities, mobilisation on the importance of sports and cultural activities, mechanisms to promote school discipline, word puzzles, building blocks and role play*. From the list, only three activities were chosen after gaining more votes: *child rights and democracy, word puzzles, and role play on capturing the best school leadership practices*. Other activities were certainly declined based on the time limit grounds. Moreover, the participants gave me a permission to record them (audio and video) and take photos while conducting PAR activities.

The first activity carried out was child rights and democracy. After every session, there was a group reflection about what transpired in their groups, which they wrote on an RGJ. The RGJ contained uniform guiding questions for all three sessions to enable participants to determine new improvements from the previous sessions. Besides, I wrote reflective journal notes (JN) on what transpired in specific groups to assess whether the resisting forces were addressed during the sessions. Three JN (JN1-JN3) were used to compare the reflections from the focus

groups to what I noted during the sessions. Each focus group reported their reflection to the research group and, thereafter, commented on every group's reflection for further improvements before the next PAR activities were conducted.

Session 4: Action on change plans

After PAR activities were selected during the planning of the change approaches in session two (S2), participants were given group homework for the next session (S3). During S3, they were told to write their ideas on the flip charts after listening to the audio clips. After they wrote on their flip charts, they presented their ideas to the study group. While they presented their work, they were considerate of the constraining factors which surfaced in the school and then strived to mitigate them. The following part discussed how the three PARs were conducted by the participants.

a) First Activity: Video clips (Emancipation of children's rights through democracy)

At the beginning of the session, two short video clips were played on the laptop, and participants were asked to listen carefully. After the video clips were played, participants were asked individually to reflect on what they heard. The purpose was to evaluate the participants' understanding of the concepts mentioned in the video clips. After reflecting on the video clips, I provided each focus group with a flip chart to discuss in groups and write the children's rights which prevail in their school, including those addressed in the video clips. Thereafter, they presented their work to the research group. Firstly, they presented their work where they were expected to share chances among themselves on who to do this or that. They were informed that at the end of their presentation, they had to reflect on how they came up with their work and what challenges they encountered.

During reflection, one focus group found it difficult to come together. Evidently, FG1 revealed that *"we were not that happy because there were some colleagues who did not want to speak throughout"* (RGJ1). This attitude did not sound well with other group members since they knew from the beginning through session one that they would engage in the activities as a group rather than individually. This aligns with the literature. Bartunek and Woodman (2015), maintain that *"the types of conversations people have in their organization and those with whom they have the conversations are crucial for change"* (p. 166). Participants expected every member to do their part in the activity, which they failed to do, despite that they were given

space and opportunity to express their voice (Lundy, 2007). Contrary to that, other groups showed satisfaction with the interactions among themselves when revealed, FG2 and FG3, *indicated their appreciation of excitement in their groups as they cooperated well during interactions* (RGJ1). I equally confirm that some participants were withdrawn from the task while others were busy discussing their work before the presentation.

Besides, age dominion was evident to have a big influence on participants' participation and was noticed in nearly every group. To confirm this claim, the JN1 revealed the following: *"Few learners were able to discuss with each other softly where the rest of the group members could not understand what is being said. Especially the elder members were the ones talking a lot"*. Besides that, *"grade 6 and 7 learners were the ones writing the posters and played the positions of group leaders respectively"* (JN1).

On a different note, all focus groups revealed their satisfaction with how their views were taken by others; for example, FG3 mentioned that *"we gave every member a chance to say something and it was easy for most members to speak in the mother tongue"* (RGJ1). Although they were democratic, some groups were heavily challenged by the confidence of their members regarding participation and decision making. Although the language barrier seemed to be mitigated using vernacular (Shinana, 2023), it appeared that confidence remained a major challenge towards authentic participation (Nandasinghe, 2020; Wajdi, 2017). To confirm that, FG1 expressed that *"some learners were asked to say something then refused. We also asked them to write on the poster but replied that they do not know how to write with the marker pens"* (RGJ1).

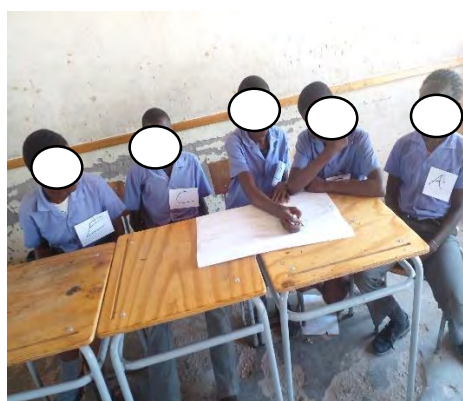


Figure 4.2: FG2 on writing task (flip chart)



Figure 4.3: FG1 reporting to the study group

b) Second activity: Word puzzle

The second activity of the PAR session conducted was the ‘word puzzle’, which was seemingly liked by children since it involved playing (Lundy, 2007). Through peer interaction, it might prepare them to handle different behaviours from their non-participant peers in the school or society at large. I distributed different word puzzle sheets and then asked the participants to wait until I gave them the pencils. I read the instructions to the study group and then gave them a chance to ask questions before they started. The participants showed good interest in the activity, which displayed that the children could do wonders with something they liked (see Figure 4.3). Hence, they do best on what is in their interest alongside proper consultation through leadership opportunities (Grant, 2015; Grant & Kajee, 2023). After they were done, I distributed all three types of word puzzle sheets to other groups to follow. Thereafter, they chose their representative to report their work to the study group.

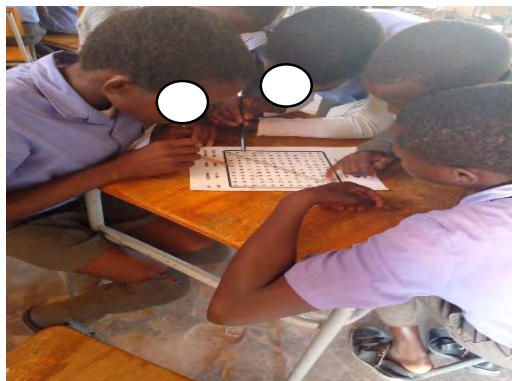


Figure 4.3: FG2 busy with word puzzle activity

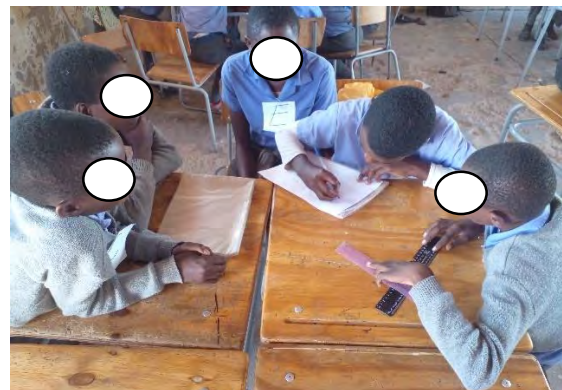


Figure 4.5: FG3 Reflecting on session activity

On reflection, most of the participants were interacting, which displayed good collaboration in their focus groups. To support the claim, FG1 revealed that *“all of us participated fantastically, and that made us feel happier”* (RGJ2). Similarly, *“We all felt good because everyone was enjoying the activity”* (FG3, RGJ2). This was contrary to what FG2 experienced when they stated that *“this time were felt bad because we were not working together and some members were just looking at others”* (RGJ2). This confirmed what I observed during the activity: *“Participants were fully involved and seemed to have enjoyed the activity carried out because they were talking and smiling to each other which demonstrated that they were amused by the*

activity given” (JN2). Participants felt ownership of what they were doing and believed in everybody’s ideas that they were doing correct work. Evidently, FG1 noted that *“every participant was eager to participate where we decided to raise up hands because everybody wanted a chance”* (JN2). This confirmed the notion of Cam et al. (2022), who mentioned that students who initiate something are more likely to see its importance and strive to achieve it, which creates a sense of ownership. This attitude was noticed in nearly all groups.

It seemed the issue of participation was properly addressed through this activity. The participants did not blame each other for not being involved in the decision despite that some answers were wrong. Hence, a participant from FG1 stated that they agreed to the final answer as a group, *“Especially the grade 6 and 7 learners wanted to do everything on behalf of other learners who were not doing anything. Since we were told to consider everyone’s idea, we gave them chances to say something though”*. On the same note, a learner participant in FG3 further reiterated that *“all of us took part and everybody was willing to do more even though it was not the one asked”* (RGJ2). Having involved everyone in the decision making seemed to have boosted the interest of every member despite their ages and grades. Although Yu and Shay (2022) are convinced that the level of participation is predominated by hierarchical structure and age in schools, it was a different experience in this PAR activity. It appeared that when learners understood the task well, the issue of age and position was void. This was supported by a learner participant in FG3 who noted that in their group, *“There was nobody who did not participate in the activity”* (RGJ2). This equated with what I noted: *“Almost every group member was assigned to locate a particular word on the word puzzle forms and encircled it when happened to figure it out. He/she told others about the answer before encircling it but only after being agreed to all of the members”* (JN2). However, some participants indicated that despite the members’ active participation, there were members who did not say anything.

After this activity, the learners were informed they had to rehearse for the next PAR activity, ‘role play’ which is discussed below.

c) Third activity: Role play on capturing the best school leadership practices

This was the last PAR child-friendly activity that the participants undertook to address the factors that hinder effective learner leadership development. This activity aligns with the literature, where Hart (2008) relates that *“I noted the high degrees of group participation that children can often achieve in their early years in their socio-dramatic play with one another”*

(p. 20). Through doing role play, I was equally convinced that participants would be more involved in the activity. Participants proposed their own leadership styles that they found in their curriculum subjects like social studies. They wanted to dramatise them and then reflect on how they promoted learners' democratic participation in schools. They prepared for a week to have ample time to attend to their academic responsibilities. The focus groups conducted their role play as follows:

- FG1: Authoritarian leadership style
- FG2: Laissez-faire leadership style
- FG3: Democratic leadership style



Figure 4.4: FG3 Role-playing the authoritarian leadership style

After all the groups performed their role plays (see Figure 4.4), the participants were given about 10 minutes to reflect on the successes and weaknesses of their performance and, most importantly, on how they addressed the leadership development constraints. This time, the groups noticed a big difference compared to the other PAR activities conducted earlier. In FG1, a learner participant remarked that their interactions during rehearsal were outstanding: *“Our role play went well and all of us were happy”* (RGJ3). Similarly, *“This time felt good and worked well together as a result everyone was serious with their roles in the play”* (FG2 and FG3). The groups really demonstrated how organised they were throughout the play, regardless of their grade level. I concur with the participants' views because I equally noted that *“the third activity was different completely from the previous ones. Learners were free to express their*

feelings during the role play” (JN3). The participants revealed that their performance was mainly influenced by individuals’ enthusiasm for seeing themselves wanted in their groups. Related to that, FG1 claimed: *“Yes, our group did very good because everyone did something in the play and we spoke loud”* (RGJ3). Similarly, FG2 mentioned: *“Everybody was serious with the role play and we changed where we realised that some members were not good at such parts of the role play”* (RGJ3). Even though these group participants did not observe any challenges, this was in contrast to RGJ3 in FG3 who expressed the following: *“No, some ideas from the members were not considered especially from the grade 4 members. This was not good, and they eventually became quiet”*.

Every group member seemed involved in decision making about the role play. RGJ3 in FG1 mentioned that *“everyone participated well because we rehearsed well and did not wanted to be laughed at by other groups for poor role play”*. Again, RGJ3 in FG2 indicated that *“despite that everybody was participating in the role play, some members were just waiting to be told what they were going to say”*. It seemed the resisting forces were slowly being overpowered by the moving forces, lessening the weaknesses in the focus groups and prompting the desired change (Burnes, 2020). Although they seemed to have achieved democracy in decision making, a grade 5 participant noted this exception: *“All of us took part and everybody was willing to do more. Unfortunately, some ideas were not wanted by the older learners”* (RGJ3). Participants displayed good confidence during their role play: *“Even the younger participants (grade 4 and 5) were able to be creative enough in terms of body expression and verbally”* (JN3).

Having completed the PAR activities, I now turn the discussion to the third step of the model of change – the ‘Refreezing step’, which is mainly constituted by reflection.

4.6.3 Refreezing step

After the three PAR activities were implemented, the participants had to evaluate the positive changes which occurred. Refreezing occurs when the learners adopt a new habit and sustain it (Burnes & Bargal 2017). Firstly, the refreezing step served as my final reflection on the change processes. Secondly, it is the final stage of Lewin’s step model of change which corresponds with ‘reflection’ – the last agentive stage of O’Leary’s cycle of action research.

Participants can only determine if they made progress when they see whether the changes have occurred through evaluation and then propose what should be done to achieve their goals

through group reflection. Thus, “Without evaluation, the people involved in the process do not know the extent to which their objectives were achieved” (Burnes & Bargal, 2017, p. 12). Through repeated reflection, participants proposed new approaches to bring about changes regarding the problem in their groups (Burnes, 2020). In fact, the refreezing step had been addressed throughout the conducting of reflection, session after session. This enabled the participants to determine whether they were making progress in suppressing the resisting forces discussed earlier. The reflections from each focus group also created awareness in other groups to improve their attitudes by emulating good practices towards learner leadership development. Though the questions on the RGJ sheet were uniform, participants were able to relate their growth, taking into consideration the previous reflections. Hence, the next section presents and discusses the strengths and shortcomings of each activity conducted.

- **Session 5: General reflection on planned changes**

This was the fifth session (S5) where we reflected on the whole process of the PAR sessions. The reflections are discussed based on the data gathered from the unfreezing step, moving step, and then refreezing. The refreezing change was certainly observed through different activities based on the participants’ views on whether they noticed new changes and institutionalised them. In this session, the participants seemed passive, which might have been caused by the absence of learner-friendly activities they seemed to enjoy. Nonetheless, some participants expressed how they felt about the study, the improvements it made, and what worked and what did not work in the previous four sessions. From the discussion of data, new themes emerged from the participants’ feelings expressed during the research study, such as the successes and shortcomings of the PAR activities.

4.6.3.1 Successes of the PAR activities

The prime objective for undertaking the study was to stimulate democracy through participation and develop leadership in learners. Thereafter, it was to identify the possible constraints to democratic participation and seek appropriate ways to mitigate them to achieve new social behaviours in the school. The PAR activities seemed the best tool to change group behaviours (group dynamics, “the forces operating in groups”) among study participants by coming up with informed reflections (Burnes, 2004). The reflections made by participants presented some positive improvements regarding the constraints.

Healthy focus group collaboration established: Findings from the data revealed that strong collaboration among group members was observed. It was noted that some members demonstrated dodging attitudes, and this was complained about at the beginning of the PAR session. For example, FG2 mentioned that *“some members were absent when we were doing the task which will be presented during the workshop today. They refused to come to us and did not respond when we called them to the group work”* (RGJ1). This complaint was never heard until the completion of the study, meaning that their old behaviours were somehow transformed into new, changed behaviours. Concerning the complaint, participants indicated new insight into understanding others’ behaviours. Hence, FG1 revealed that *“we asked them to share their ideas next time when we are going to be assigned to the following activities”* (RGJ1). In the same vein, FG2 disclosed that *“we advised them that if they do not take part in the discussions, they will never become leaders”* (RGJ1). In support of the literature, Rule and John (2011) share that the purpose of engaging participants in AR is to “generate understanding which empowers participants to take action to solve problems and improve their circumstances” (p. 83). My involvement as an adult [researcher] seemed to have contributed to positive collaboration in their focus groups since I used to advise them on the areas of improvement after they presented their reflections.

Improved confidence: The data revealed that a notable change was observed in participants’ confidence. Most of the work was done by older learners in the first activity. For instance, I wrote that *“younger participants (grade 4 and 5) were literally passive and likely found it difficult to propose their views to the older learners in their groups and seemed waiting to be told by older ones”* (JN1). Likewise, *“All posters were written by the grade 7 learners in all three groups, again, all selected group leaders were grade 7 learners”* (JN1).

This, however, turned out differently in the last two activities when some younger participants emerged as active participants. In that line, FG2 stated that *“the workshop trained us to speak loud and confidently because we promised that we were going to speak loud during our discussions. It also prepared us to express our views freely in every activity that we are involved”* (RGJ3). To enhance other members’ confidence, participants revealed that they considered helping passive participants during their rehearsal; regarding that, FG1 mentioned that *“during our rehearsal sessions we told other members what they were going to say and whenever they forget, we reminded them on what to say”* (RGJ3).

Collective decision-making enhancement: Participants also adapted the spirit of doing their activities collectively where they convinced other members to find the word puzzle, something they ignored to do in the first activity. In this view, an FG1 participant indicated that “*we also learnt to listen to each other and accepted those participants in our group even though they are not participating*” (RGJ2). Furthermore, an FG3 participant observed that “*some group members could not answer any question during the focus group interview. However, after we started with the study they began to say something*” (RGJ1). I also noted that “*the elder participants especially grades 6 and 7 were ones correcting others to make sure that they got everything right*” (JN2). In addition, FG2 indicated that “*we helped them by telling them on what to say during the role play because they just lack ideas and innovations*” (RGJ3). Participants displayed a sense of influencing the passive group members since PAR promotes collective reasoning and evidence-based learning focused on social action (Chevalier & Buckles, 2019). It was also imperative that most participants observed new changes regarding their behaviours. FG2 expressed:

The workshop trained us to tolerate and respect others even though they are not doing the right things. It also trained us to be the leaders of others, hence, we had to do the work for them. Otherwise, we all end up failing the word puzzle. (RGJ2)

4.6.3.2 Shortcomings of PAR activities

Findings from the data revealed that some constraints to learner leadership were not successfully addressed despite the PAR sessions conducted. Although I expected every participant to develop new leadership skills, such a dream was never fully achieved, mainly for younger participants. Even though the PAR made some great changes, age differences and low confidence appeared to be the biggest hindrances towards achieving the desired change to the fullest, as discussed below.

Age influenced the participants’ confidence: Older learners seemed to dominate younger learners. In several cases, grade 7 learners held the position of group leaders – they were the ones to approve everything, seemingly belittling the young learners. One participant noted: “*Most of younger participants in the groups listened to the elder participants for the approval of their ideas. Hence, the elder ones had final input in most ideas which are contributed by the group members*” (JN2). Understandably, a leader should be active and confident (Nandasinghe, 2020), and these qualities seem not fully developed in grade 4 and 5 learners.

As a result, they occasionally looked to the older learners to lead. Referring to the last PAR activity, JN3 explained: *“Despite that the younger learners were confident in their participations, the elder participants continued to play the positions of leaders in the society such as school principals”* (JN3).

Age and confidence in a leadership context are directly proportional since most of the younger participants hesitated to lead despite being convinced by others. Besides, it seemed the older learners had little confidence in the younger participants as they feared being let down. In support of older participants' behaviour, Wallin (2003) observed from his study's findings that “more internal responsibility for leadership was taken as students became older, more mature, and began settling their goals for their individual futures” (p. 69). This implies that older participants developed better than younger participants since they took leadership responsibility seriously, unlike the younger ones, and advisably should be the ones to interact with parents (Harcourt & Hägglund, 2013). Subsequently, I believe this was the best method to group them to enhance participation despite their age differences. Aligning with this idea, Cook-Sather (2020) expresses that, “Research methods for working with young students need to be particularly attentive to those students' contexts and to their individual vulnerability because of their age” (p. 185).

4.7 Conclusion

This chapter is the heart of the study since it presents the findings of the research questions. It also presented how the data were analysed and interpreted in line with the study theory and appropriate analytical tools. The next chapter summarises the discussed findings and concludes the research study.

CHAPTER FIVE: SUMMARY OF FINDINGS, RECOMMENDATION AND CONCLUSION

5.1 Introduction

This chapter captures the essence of the entire thesis, offering a concise overview of the research journey. It revisits the research questions posed earlier, serving as a reminder to the reader. The study's findings are summarised while candidly acknowledging its limitations. Furthermore, it presents the contribution made towards leadership knowledge derived from the study and recommendations for future research are given. Finally, I conclude this final chapter by reflecting on my personal journey throughout the study, adding a personal touch to the academic discourse.

5.2 Research Goals and Questions

The study aimed to stimulate the democratic participation of senior primary learners to develop leadership skills through PAR workshop sessions. To achieve the study's goals, four research questions were used and implemented in two phases. Phase 1 solicited responses to the first three questions (1–3), while phase 2 solicited responses to the fourth question (4). They are as follows:

1. How is the notion of learner democratic participation perceived within the school?
2. What activities do learners lead at the school?
3. What factors enable or constrain leadership development in learners?
4. How does the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

5.3 Summary of the Findings

The summary is presented in the chronological order of the research sub-questions.

5.3.1 Participants' understanding on learner democratic participation in schools

Participants indicated that the perception of democratic participation is not confined to a single meaning but is premised on the diversity of individuals' opinions. Meaning, there is no definite definition of learner democratic participation. The concept is understood as giving a platform for freedom of expression to learners in school reforms. Participants acknowledged that being given the freedom to express their voice in numerous leading aspects reflects the true meaning of democracy in school society (Shuttle, 2007). Furthermore, the data strongly supports the notion of democratic participation where learners are involved in the leadership decisions of the school. Most participants emphasised that the key factor to democracy is when they are involved in decision making regarding school leadership. In addition, the concept is also understood as a promotion of legitimating learner voice in school leadership matters where learners' feelings are considered. Lastly, the findings revealed that participants understood that to attain democratic participation, the school should create an atmosphere where autonomy is accorded to learners when undertaking leadership roles and activities with little control from their teachers.

5.3.2 Activities that learners lead at the school

Leadership responsibilities were associated with leading certain responsibilities in the school. Despite the focus of the study being the emancipation of learner democratic participation in the school, participants responded from the leading of activities perspective (they usually lead) rather than learner voice participation in the school. However, I alert the reader that there was a conflation between leadership and management from the learners' understanding; therefore, not all activities seemed to promote leadership attributes but rather management roles, as discussed in section 4.4.

Nonetheless, participation is mainly about taking action (Yu & Shay, 2022) rather than talking. Hence, there is an interconnection between leadership activities and learner participation in decision making. These responses were elicited during phase one of the study through individual and focus group interviews.

Findings revealed that several activities were led by the learners in order to transform them into leaders within the school set-up. Participants frequently spearheaded the cleaning campaign activities in the school with little supervision from their teachers. Although they were supposed to lead themselves and make their own decisions, supervision from the teachers was also required to guide them when needed. This is why it is suggested that teachers' involvement is important in this regard for their guidance (Lundy, 2007, 2018). They acknowledged being mandated with responsibilities to divide work areas among themselves. Moreover, it was also stressed that participants oversaw assuming responsibility for leading sports activities in the absence and presence of their teachers, however, they mainly preferred to do their work in the absence of the adults (Shier, 2001). For example, they officiated at soccer and netball training sessions when their teachers were absent. The data further indicated that participants were also exposed to leadership roles through class monitoring in a supervisory capacity. According to the participants, the opportunity to supervise others in and out of class has awakened in them the capability of keeping order and taking accountability. Finally, the findings revealed that participants were mainly involved in leading the nurturing of the school's plants as a leadership responsibility. It was the task of learners to see that the plants were watered daily. They indicated that they learnt to take responsibility for the plants and watered them for others who were absent from school. In a nutshell, this indicated that participants developed a sense of leadership through carrying out all the mentioned activities.

Despite these activities, they expressed that they had little impact on decision making and teachers decided for them (Holquist & Walls, 2023; Lundy, 2018). Since the study's focus was on learner democratic participation, this area was addressed during PAR sessions, which was discussed later in this section (Section 5.3.4). The agenda of leadership activities in this study was simply to determine whether the learners could execute leadership responsibilities with or without adults' assistance.

To sum up, the findings strongly indicated that learners were considered useful members of leadership agents in the school structure. However, the school had a culture of recognising that older learners would lead younger learners with minimal control from the teachers. In essence, age seemed to be a precondition for learner leadership (Nthontho, 2017a). Disappointingly, teachers' involvement seemed less welcome by some learners at certain times.

5.3.3 Enablements and constraints for learner leadership development

The findings revealed that the promotion of learner leadership development was attributed to several factors. To begin with, motivation and recognition influenced the participants' interest in carrying out leadership activities effectively. Having received moral support from teachers in different ways, like being offered food and receiving awards for a job well done boosted their leadership spirit. In addition, participants strongly indicated that being considered democratic participants through collective decision making in school leadership enhanced learner leadership practices. Participants revealed through their responses that being given opportunities to participate in decision-making processes raised their interest in taking leadership opportunities in the school. Lastly, participants felt confident when they took full charge of their decisions without the teachers' intervention. Notably, autonomy to learners was among the factors that promoted learner leadership in the school.

In contrast, the findings also revealed some drawbacks, which seemingly discouraged some participants from leading activities. Though participants were provided the opportunities to participate in school decisions, they equally found it strange when some critical decisions were taken without their inclusion. This finding aligns with Mabovula (2009), who expressed that learners' participation in school leadership seemed a mere persuasion by teachers since their input was probably less needed by the school authority. On a similar note, participants were challenged regarding the level of autonomy they had when leading activities. Adults seemed to be over-controlling and expected to evaluate everything that learners were entrusted to do. Subsequently, learners felt incompetent and opted to step aside so the adults could do things themselves. However, the findings also indicated that participants lacked self-esteem and accountability, hence, teachers' involvement was still required for guidance. The issue of autonomy was a complex situation since nobody knew when the teachers should assist the learners and when not to assist them. Lastly, age dominance played a major role as a limiting factor in the enactment of learner leadership development (Shinana, 2023; Yu & Shay, 2022). Despite the mechanisms made through PAR implementation, it is evident that adults remained adults in any circumstance. The misconception that adults should always make the final decision seemingly surfaced in younger participants' minds. Conclusively, I am convinced that age and confidence are inseparable.

The PAR was undertaken to mitigate the obstacles hindering learner leadership development. However, it yielded minimal impact on addressing low self-esteem, particularly in younger learners. The influence of misconceptions of societal cultural values, negative peer pressure and age as a precondition to determining who is capable of participating in leadership matters were some notable drawbacks to the emancipation of learner leadership development in the school. Some of the highlighted barriers were addressed and successfully resolved.

5.3.4 How did the PAR process stimulate and expand democratic participation and leadership development in learners?

The data revealed that positive changes towards leadership development were achieved. Findings revealed that participants expressed their gratitude concerning the PAR sessions where healthy collaboration was established in their focus groups, unlike before. Furthermore, participants exhibited notable passive behaviour in the discussions during the unfreezing sessions conducted before the PAR sessions. It was remarked that high confidence surfaced in older participants through their enthusiastic interest in leadership activities. The data also revealed that participants had limited freedom of expression before they engaged in the PAR activity sessions, a notable observation of improvement found mainly in the older learner participants. The findings revealed that, at first, learners were hardly communicating in their focus groups to make collective decisions during PAR activities. However, after they were given several chances to participate in PAR activities, they eventually learnt to consider everyone's view before giving their answer, which enhanced collective decision making in the process

5.4 Challenges Encountered in the Study

According to Loomis and Akkari (2021, p. 646), "Every study has limitations and strengths", and this study was no exception. It encountered several challenges that might have affected its efficiency to some extent.

Firstly, the lack of time at times exacerbated the effective implementation of the PAR activities. Participants were rushed through the activities, sometimes to avoid going beyond the planned duration in order to comply with the study's ethics. Despite that, we sometimes went beyond the set time since flexibility was allowed in the study through mutual agreement with participants.

Secondly, the PAR session schedule was less manageable owing to distractions such as extra-mural activities. On many occasions, participants were distracted by teachers wanting them to attend sports training or write tests in the afternoons and ignored the PAR calendar given to staff members. This attitude might have discouraged some participants seeing that the study was less important in the school. Likewise, Shinana (2023) noted that some rural parents “tell their children that the reason for sending them to school was not to lead or be led by that person's child” (p. 215). Thus, Pascual (2023) urges that “positive changes in the school can only be achieved if the school stakeholders manifest commitment and pledge involvement to school programs, projects, and activities” (p. 28). Advisably, Shier (2001) urges that teachers should take positive actions when working with learners to overcome the barriers affecting leadership development.

Thirdly, the language barrier also contributed to the passivity of the participants. Most learners struggled to communicate in English, especially grade 4 and grade 5 learners; despite being advised to use their Indigenous language, they were still too shy to use it during the sessions. Though legitimising the vernacular use in this study was less effective, it appears to not be the case in other studies. For instance, Shinana (2023) explained that in their study, “Most learners prefer to communicate in the vernacular, which is Oshikwanyama, an indigenous language” (p. 219).

Lastly, there was limited literature available on leadership among primary school learners. This gap posed a challenge, leading me to rely on a few older sources rather than more recent research. Consequently, this underscores the need for further studies on learner leadership development in primary school contexts. Despite these challenges, the study still contributes to the generation of knowledge on the topic.

5.5 Knowledge Development Through the Study

This study contributes to leadership knowledge from two key perspectives. Firstly, it examined the impact on learner leadership within Namibian schools and across Africa. Secondly, it evaluated the beneficial effects at a specific school site, providing a model for other primary schools to enhance their learner leadership practices. The study serves as a catalyst to address the research gap in school leadership research between secondary and primary learners. Hallinger (2018) asserts that few studies were conducted in primary compared to secondary school education regarding learner leadership. Besides, it expands the number of learner

leadership studies conducted in an African context, which is statistically lower compared to Western societies where leadership seems to emanate (Hallinger, 2018).

The study was conducted to transform the school environment by empowering multiple leaders based on their individual cognitive development. Hence, enhancing democratic participation among learners so they could become leaders in the school was the quest of the study. The study uplifted younger learners who had been narrowly exposed to leadership opportunities, resulting in them being passive democratic participants, disregarding the opportunities to become leaders (Grant, 2015; Mabovula, 2009). The study significantly improved the learners' confidence in many aspects. They were able to talk to others at assembly, approach teachers and express their views, to mention a few. It further opened their eyes to understand their constitutional rights better regarding the education system both locally and internationally, something they did not know before the study. The leadership skills learnt by participants also spread to fellow learners through demonstrated obedience to school regulations, as active decision-makers and as class monitors in their respective classes. As a result, this enlightened the learners about leadership responsibilities in the school, which developed into distributed leadership.

Above all, the study has transformed me into a better school principal. Being exposed to the three-change model through engagement with learners during the PAR process may also be effective in transforming the practices of my fellow staff members. With the knowledge I have gained, I am confident that I can be a driving force for positive change in the school (Roşca, 2020).

5.6 Critiques of the Theoretical Framework in This Study

First, this section reflects on the adoption of Kurt Lewin's field theory and change theory, which framed this study. I then discuss Lewin's three-step change model, which is used as an analytical tool to understand the phenomenon being examined. Second, I explore both the positive contributions and the setbacks encountered in relation to the theories that provided the framework for the study.

The study primarily employed Lundy's (2007) model of children's participation and Hart's (1992) ladder of participation while placing particular emphasis on Lewin's three-step change model. The participatory activities conducted during the PAR sessions were selected following

the principles of Lundy's model of children's participation. Participants were transformed from playing passive to active roles. Initially, they were given space to adapt to one another, then prepared to voice their opinions and listen to others, ultimately influencing perspectives through collective group efforts. The Lundy model was linked to Hart's ladder, where older learners supported younger learners, as advocated by Hart's approach.

The study also applied group dynamics, AR and Lewin's three-step change model to drive organisational change. After the constraining factors affecting learner leadership development were identified in phase one, group dynamics and AR were employed to facilitate the necessary changes in phase two. Since the study aimed to resolve specific problems, PAR (a subset of AR) was used. To achieve school-wide change, learners participated in focus groups, aiming to shift group behaviours rather than individual ones (Burnes, 2004), with a recognition that certain forces are needed to break established patterns (Burnes, 2020). Lewin's three-step change model helped provide a better understanding of how individuals and groups behave and how to change their existing practices.

It is worth mentioning that after several PAR sessions, participants managed to identify some underlying constraining factors. They exhibited more confidence and autonomy, improved group collaboration and enhanced collective decision making. The study brought about notable changes in learners' behaviour, with increased active participation promoting leadership development in various ways. However, challenges remained, such as the influence of age differences. Older participants frequently assumed decision-making roles, indicating an imbalance in group dynamics.

Since field theory is a comprehensive framework with four interconnected entities, meaningful change takes time. The PAR sessions could not meet all expectations immediately, as participants needed gradual reflection and adaptation to embrace new behaviours fully. Despite these challenges, the study aligned effectively with the theories and models used, demonstrating significant progress in learner leadership development. In addition, it contributed valuable insights to the existing body of knowledge on leadership in educational settings.

5.7 Recommendations for Future Studies: Practical and Theoretical Considerations

I recommend that future researchers explore various aspects to identify the core constraining factors affecting learner leadership development in young learners. Traditionally, leadership has been associated with older students, but schools can break this pattern and begin to trust younger learners with leadership responsibilities. The following suggestions are recommended for implementation.

- I recommend that future research studies focus on learner leadership among primary school learners. My research journey has laid the groundwork for a deeper understanding of the factors influencing learners' progression into active leadership roles at the primary level. While my study achieved significant milestones, there is a need to investigate the root causes of stagnation further and develop impactful interventions for the future. A legitimate formulated policy advocating the emancipation of contemporary leadership in younger learners from a tender age should be introduced into primary schools. This recommendation aligns with Whitehead's (2009) findings, who asserts that leadership has been primarily focused on adult interpersonal relationships and pays little attention to developing leadership.
- I recommend that leadership development be part of the formal school curriculum like any other content subject across all grades. This is because the agenda of leadership development is not well addressed at the school level following the national frameworks (Grant & Kajee, 2023). From my observations at the PAR sessions and what I learnt from various interventions made by previous scholars, I discovered that learners are quite interested in leadership forums but are merely afforded few participative opportunities.
- Schools should be made aware that even younger learners are capable of leadership with proper moral support and guidance from their teachers. Therefore, teachers need to be empowered and equipped through contemporary in-service leadership training programmes. Discussions and engagement with parents are needed for them to understand that the leadership of future leaders begins at home before these learners are admitted into mainstream education. This practice may expose learners to leadership challenges earlier than facing them at school for the first time.
- As a member of the school leadership team, I found the study particularly interesting, especially when considering the ongoing impact of our achievements through PAR sessions

on real-life practices. Therefore, I recommend that schools should take the implementation of leadership initiatives seriously to develop future leaders.

5.8 My Study' Life Journey

Embarking on this study marked a significant milestone for me, as it expanded my professional skills in management and leadership practices. Acknowledging the challenges faced in bringing this study to completion and compiling this thesis is important. Internet accessibility was a major hurdle due to my geographical location, leading me to relocate for better network coverage weekly, which also increased financial strain. Accessing relevant articles critical to my study was particularly challenging.

I am grateful for the unwavering academic support from my supervisor, who consistently guided me back on track during moments of withdrawal. I also appreciate the encouragement and support from colleagues and others who checked in on my progress, boosting my morale to persevere despite challenges.

I take pride in achieving this milestone amid personal commitments and feel privileged to witness the significant improvements this study has contributed to learner leadership in schools. Teachers have expressed the need for its continuation, and former participants of the study have formed a group of learner leaders to coordinate school activities.

While this thesis has concluded, the journey continues!

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Appendices

Appendix A: Ethical Clearance Certificate



9 May 2024

Mr Trofimius Kaongo

g19k8970@campus.ru.ac.za

Dear Mr Trofimius S. Kaongo

Re: Stimulating democratic participation and leadership in senior primary school learners: A Namibian participatory action research study

APPLICATION NUMBER: 2024-7194-8589

This letter confirms that your research ethics renewal application has been reviewed and **APPROVED** by the Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee (EF-REC).

Approval is granted for 1 year. An annual progress report is required in order to renew approval for an additional period. You will receive an email notifying you when the progress report is due.

Should any substantive change(s) be made during the research process, that may have ethical implications, you should notify the Education Faculty REC Chair via email. This includes changes in investigators. The REC Chair will advise as to whether a new application is necessary.

Do keep this clearance letter secure and accessible throughout your study and after its completion. It will be needed when a thesis is examined and when publications are submitted to journals.

Please also submit a brief report to the REC Chair on the completion of the research. This can be done via email. The purpose of this report is to indicate whether the research was conducted successfully and whether any ethics-related matters arose that the committee should be aware of, in order to guide future studies.

Sincerely,

Prof Mags Blackie

Chair: Education Faculty Research Ethics Committee

Appendix B: Permission Letter to Regional Director

Appendix A: Request for access to the research site to the Director

Enq: Trofimus Kaongo
Cell: +264 81 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 May 2023

To: The Director of Education
Cc: The Inspector of Education
P/Bag 579
Omusati Region
Outapi

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR APPROVAL TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH IN YOUR REGION

Dear Sir

I am Trofimus Kaongo, a school principal at a Primary School in Omusati Region. I am currently a Master's in Education (Educational Leadership & Management) scholar (19K8970) at Rhodes University in South Africa. In order to fulfill the criteria of this qualification I am required to conduct research in any area that interests me in the field of my study.

The purpose of this letter serves to request your permission to conduct my research at [REDACTED] Circuit in the Omusati Region. The purpose of the study is to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership opportunities in primary school learners (grade 4-7). The Namibian Education Act. 16 of 2001, makes a provision for the establishment of a Learner Representative Council which includes secondary school learners and is relatively silent on the leadership of primary school learners. This prompted me to be interested in learner leadership development in primary school learners. Thus, the study intends to respond to the overarching research question: *To what extent does involvement in the participatory action research process stimulate and expand democratic participation and the development of leadership in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?*

Therefore, I hereby request your office to grant me permission to do my research at my school. I prefer to undertake research at my school due to the possible benefits of developing leadership amongst our learners and the issue of costs in terms of travel and time. The study targets senior primary school learners and all interested learners will be invited to participate voluntarily. Even though, the study targets approximately 15 participants (learners), every interested learner will be given

an opportunity to participate. In addition, the study will further include three primary school teachers (grades 4-7) as well as a critical friend who would reflect and critique the research processes and findings presented. A critical friend has agreed to uphold ethical principles and is willing to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The study will supposedly begin in July 2023 and end in February 2024 (8 months). The duration of the data generation process is expected to start from July 2023 to November 2023 (5 months) respectively and will be done in two phases. All activities pertaining to the study will be carried out after school hours (14h00).

Phase 1: A contextual profiling phase will supposedly run from July 2023 to August 2023, and data will be generated as follows.

- One individual interview session will be conducted with the three primary school teachers for a duration of 40-60 minutes after school hours.
- One focus group interview will be conducted with learners in their groups of four to five for approximately 60 minutes. Interviewing them in groups might take a short time compared to when interviewing them individually. Preferably, they would be grouped based on confidence (self-esteem), age, in order to have a mixed composition.
- Interview sessions will be audio-recorded to capture every detail and then transcribed later.

Phase 2: Participatory action research sessions will be conducted from August 2023 to November 2023, and data will be generated as follow.

- Five workshop sessions would be conducted with 15 learner participants. The participants will discuss the findings gathered in phase 1 to find ways to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership in the learners. Workshops are expected to be held once a week for a duration of 90 minutes after school hours. Participants would decide on which weekday they prefer to meet to allow flexibility and possibly avoid clashing with other school activities.
- After each workshop, participants will reflect on the general discussion in their groups using a reflective journal sheet. I will also make notes in my reflective journal notebook. In addition, some photos will be taken during the workshop sessions with the consent of participants. The faces will be blurred out if shared in the public domain.

The study will take place at the school under your administration; therefore, I assure you that this study will not affect the school or neither the region's character negatively in any way. In fact, the study would provide a lens to see to what extent the involvement of participatory action research sessions possibly stimulates learner participation in leadership issues. The findings would benefit the school in some ways and might be shared with other stakeholders to improve such practices at their institutions.

Finally, I emphasise that the study will not interfere with the school curriculum and flexibility will be exercised. I will uphold the ethical standards pertaining to the administration of the study such as anonymity as well as confidentiality during and after the completion of the study. The participants in the study will be allowed to withdraw without any consequence.

It is therefore on this ground that, I request you to permit me to conduct my study at the abovementioned School. For further enquiry, kindly contact my supervisor Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee at email address: *f.kajee@ru.ac.za*.

Should you have any concerns during the research the Chairperson of the Education Department Ethics Committee Professor Eureka Rosenberg may be contacted: e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za

Your positive response will be highly appreciated

Yours faithfully

Trofimus Kaongo (Researcher)

Appendix C: Regional Director's Approval



REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA



OMUSATI REGIONAL COUNCIL
DIRECTORATE OF EDUCATION, ARTS AND CULTURE
Team Work and Dedication for Quality Education

Tel: +264 65 251700
Fax: +264 65 251722

Private Bag 529
OUTAPI

Enq: Amalia Anghuwo
Ref: 13/2/9/1

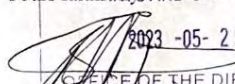
26 May 2023

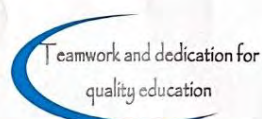
To: Mr. Trofimius Kaongo
P.O. Box 16 204
Oshihole

Re: Permission to Conduct Research Study: [REDACTED]

1. This letter serves to notify you (Mr. Trofimius Kaongo) that permission has been granted to conduct a research study focusing on "Stimulating democratic participation and leadership in senior primary school learners".
2. In addition, the information to be collected should be for the sole purpose of completing the research study only.
3. You are further informed that although permission is granted, please ensure that staff members' normal working hours is not disrupted during your study and participation is voluntary.
4. We hope and trust this exercise will enhance quality education in the Region.

Thank you for your cooperation.
Yours faithfully,


2023-05-29
OFFICE OF THE DIRECTOR
PRIVATE BAG 529, OUTAPI
REPUBLIC OF NAMIBIA
Mr. Benjamin T. Seb
Regional Director: Directorate of Education, Arts and Culture



CC: Inspector of Education: Onesie Circuit

Appendix D: Permission Letter to School Board Chairperson

Appendix B: Request for access to the research site to the School board Chairperson

Appendix B: Request for access to the research site to the School board Chairperson

NB: Usually the language of communication is English in the school context, however, if a vernacular is preferred then I will change it to vernacular for easier comprehension by those participants.

(This letter seeks the permission from the school board chairperson because I am the school principal who was supposed to grant such permission at the school level)

Enq: Trofimus Kaongo
Cell: +264 81 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 May 2023

To: The Chairperson
The School Board Members



SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH AT YOUR SCHOOL

Dear Ms/Mr.

I am Trofimus Kaongo, a school principal at a Primary School in Omusati Region. I am currently a Master's in Education (Educational Leadership & Management) scholar (19K8970) at Rhodes University in South Africa. In order to fulfill the criteria of this qualification I am required to conduct research in any area that interests me in the field of my study.

The purpose of this letter serves to request your permission in order to conduct my research at [REDACTED] Onesi Circuit in the Omusati Region. The purpose of the study is to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership opportunities in senior primary learners (grade 4-7). The Namibian Education Act. 16 of 2001, makes a provision for the establishment of a Learner Representative Council which includes secondary school learners and is relatively silent on the leadership of primary school learners. This prompted me to be interested in learner leadership development in primary school learners. Thus, the study intends to respond to the overarching research question: *To what extent does involvement in the participatory action research process stimulate and expand democratic participation and the development of leadership in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?*

It is for this reason that, I hereby request the school board committee to offer me permission to do my research at my school. I prefer to do my study at my school where I am relatively an insider. Firstly, the study will be cost-effective because I do not have to travel to another school and will not interfere with the set school curriculum or the teaching process. Secondly,

the study might benefit my own school in terms of learner leadership development. The study targets senior primary learners and all interested learners will be invited to participate voluntarily. Even though, the study targets a minimum of 15 participants (learners), every interested learner will be given an opportunity to participate. In addition, the study will also include three primary school teachers (grade 4-7) as well as a critical friend who would reflect and critique the research processes and findings presented. A critical friend has agreed to uphold ethical principles and is willing to sign a confidentiality agreement.

The study will supposedly begin in July 2023 and end in February 2024 (8 months). The duration of the data generation process is expected to start from July 2023 to November 2023 (5 months) respectively and will be done in two phases. All activities pertaining to the study will be carried out after school hours (14h00).

Phase 1: A contextual profiling phase will supposedly run from July 2023 to August 2023, and data will be generated as follows:

- One individual interview session will be conducted with three primary school teachers for a duration of 40-60 minutes after school hours.
- One focus group interview will be conducted with learners in their groups of four to five for approximately 60 minutes. Interviewing, learner participants in groups might take a shorter time compared to interviewing them individually. Preferably, participants would be grouped based on confidence (self-esteem), age, in order to have a mixed composition.
- Interview sessions will be audio-recorded to capture every detail which I possibly omitted and then transcribed later.

Phase 2: Participatory action research sessions will be conducted from August 2023 to November 2023, and data will be generated as follow.

- Five workshop sessions will be possibly conducted with 15 learner participants. The participants will discuss the findings gathered in phase 1 so that they find ways to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership in the learners. The workshops are expected to be held once a week for a duration of 90 minutes after school working hours. Participants would decide on which weekday they prefer to meet to allow flexibility and avoid possible clashes with other school activities. Furthermore, your committee will be informed swiftly about the changes that might occur during the running of program.
- After each workshop, participants will reflect on the general discussion in their groups using a reflective journal sheet. Besides, I will make notes in my reflective journal notebook as well. In addition, some photos will be taken during the workshop sessions with the consent of participants. The faces will be blurred out if shared in the public domain.

I assure you that this study will not affect the school's character negatively in any way. In fact, the study would provide a lens to see to what extent the involvement of participatory action research sessions possibly stimulates their participation in leadership issues so that the practice may be applied to other schools in the region. The findings would benefit the school in particular in some ways and might be shared with other stakeholders to improve such practices at their institutions.

Finally, I emphasise that the study will not interfere with the school work and flexibility will be exercised. I will uphold the ethical standards pertaining to the administration of the study such as anonymity as well as confidentiality during and after the completion of the study. The participants in the study will be granted the chance if they wish to withdraw without any consequence.

Therefore, I sincerely request your permission to conduct my study at my school and I trust this request will receive your utmost attention. For further enquiry, kindly contact my supervisor Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee at email address: *f.kajee@ru.ac.za*.

*Should you have any concerns during the research the Chairperson of the Education Department Ethics Committee Professor Eureka Rosenberg may be contacted: *e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za**

Your positive response will be highly anticipated

Kindly'

Mr. Trofimius Kaongo (Researcher)

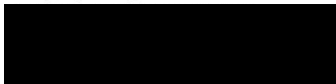
Appendix D1: Translated permission letter to the School Board Chairperson

Appendix B1: Translated consent letter to the School Board Chairperson

Omapulo: Trofimus Kaongo
Cell: +264 81 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 Mei 2023

Komunashipundi wetonatelofikola
Koilyo yokangudu ketonatelofikola



OSHIKALIMO: Eindilo lepitikilo opo ndi ninge elihongo nongonono pofikola yeni

Kuye Meme/Tate

Aeme Trofimus Kaongo, omukulunhufikola pofikola [REDACTED] nOmusati Region. Ohandi lihongela odjapo yo Master Degree i na sha nelelo nosho ewiliko lehongo, onomola yange 19K8970, ondi li koshiputudilo Rhodes University mo South Africa. Opo nee ndiwanifepo oipumbwiwa yelihongo eli, ondi na oku ninga elihongo-nongonono mo shitukulwa shelihongo lange.

ompapila ei ota yi pula epitikilo opo ndi ninge elihongo-nongonono [REDACTED] Onesi Circuit mOmusati Region. Elalakano lelihongo-nongonono eli oku papudula ovalihongi vehongo lopetameko (Ondondo 4-7) opo vakufe ombinga memanguluko voo vadule oku kufa ombinga mewiliko lelihongo lavo. Okatendo kelongo laNamibia, 16 ko 2001, oka yandja oufemba kokangudu kalelipo kovanafikola meesekundofikola opo vakufe ombinga meewiliko leefikola davo, ashike i na aka yandja omhito kovalihongi vehongo lopetameko. Eshi osha xwaxwameka nge opo ndi papudule eemhito dewiliko movalihongi vehongo lopetameko. Onghene, elihongo-nongonono e li ota li wilikwa kepulo: *Fiyo opo nghatu ili ovalihongi vehongo lopetameko tava dulu oku kufa ombinga yamanguluka opo va dule okuwilika ta shi pitile mekufombinga lavo lexwaxwameko lelihongo-nongonono eli?*

Onghene ohandi pula epitikilo kokangudu kekelelofikola e li, omo handi kala onga omulihongi-nongonono womeni lofikola ei. Onda hoolola ofikola ei shaashi ita ndi ka longifa oshimaliwa shihapu no handi kawanifapo oilonga yange yofikola noupu. Elihongo-nongonono e li ota li ka kwafela ovanafikola vopofikola ei vakaninge ovawiliki wawa. Ovahongwa aveshe vo petameko otava pewa omhito opo vakufe ombinga, ashike ohandi ka pumbwa ovahongwa 15 melihongo-nongonono eli. Elihongo-nongonono eli ola kwatelamo yoo ovalongi vatatu veendodo dopetameko nomuyandjimaye umwe.

Elihongo-nongonono e li ota li ka tameka mu Juli 2023 fiyo Febuluali 2024. Eongelo lomauelele ota li tameke mu Juli 2023 fiyo omu Novomba 2023 (eemwedi 5), no ta shi ka ningwa momalweefo avalu. Oinyangadalwa aisho ota yi ka ningwa konima yeetundi (14h00).

Olweefo 1: oku ongela omauyelele ope tameko ota a tameke mu Juli 2023 fiyo Aguste 2023, no ta shi ka enda nee ngaha.

- Omapulapula paumwe olweefo limwe novalongi vatatu veendodo do petameko, oulefimbo wominute 40-60 konima yeetundi.
- Omapulapulo oshikando shimwe ashike, ovahongwa poungudu unhe (4) oulefimbo leeminute 60. Omapulapulo opaungudu ota a longifa efimbo lixupi kuyelekanifa paumwe. Ovahongwa ngeno ota va kala moungudu valumbakana pamadiladilo.
- Omawi avo otaa ka kufwako opo a ka tulwe miitya pombapila konima yefimbo.

Olweefo 2: Eetundi dexwaxwameko lelihongo-nongonono e li ota di tameke mu Aguste 2023 fiyo Novomba 2023.

- Eetundi-ilonga dili 5 ota di ka kalwa kovahongwa 15. Meetundi-ilonga dotete ota mu likundwa omauyelele a ongelwa molweefo lotete, opo nee ta ku twikilwa neenghambadala do ku uya po nexwaxwameko lokukufa ombinga pamanguluko lovahongwa. Eetundi-ilonga ota di kalako lumwe moshivike oule weeminute 90 (14h00-15h30). Ovakufimbinga ota va ka tulapo efiku olo levawapalela, ashike omalunduluko otaa dulu okuningwa apa tashi wapalele no kangundu keni ota ka ka shiivifilwa.
- Ovahongwa otava ka ninga etalululo koninima yeetundi-ilonga oikando itatu paungudu vavo, tava ka hadeke meembapila. Natango ohandi ka ninga etalululo nghene eetundi-ilonga da enda medidilikwambo lange. Ota ku ka kufwa yoo omafano ovakufimbinga meetundi ilonga edi papitikilo lavo, ashike oipala yavo ota yi ka uvikwa opo iha monike membwalangadjo.

Ohandi kwashilipaleke kutya ashishe eshi tashi ningwa ita shi ka nyana nande omukufimbinga ile ofikola eyi. Elihongo-nongonono eli ota li ka yandja onengelelo oku mona kutya ovanafikola vopetameko otava dulu okulela fiyo openi meekufombinga lamanguluka tashi pitile meetundi-ilonga opo yo oshidjemo shi andjanekwe neefikola dikwao. Oshidjemo sheetundi longa edi otashi ka kwafela ofikola momikalo dihapu no ta yi ka andjanekelwa koiputudilohongo ikwao.

Pexulilo, ohandi fiindilemo kutya elihongo-nongonono e li i ta li ka ya oilonga yofikola moshipala nomalunduluko ota a ka ningwa apa shapumbiwa. Ohandi ke li ufa komikanghalandu delihongo-nongonono e li, ngaashi oku holeka omaukwatya ovakufimbinga. Ovakufimbinga ota va ka pewa omhito yo ku li kufamo meelihongo-nongonono e li pe he na oshilanduli.

Ongene ohandi indile eefelo opo ndi ninge elihongo-nongonono lange mofikola yange nondelineekela eindilo e li ota mu lifimaneke. Omapulo a wedwapo, kwatafana nomukwafelimehongo wange, Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee ko email address: *f.kajee@ru.ac.za*. Oto dulu yoo okuwatafana nomunashipundi wokangudu komilandumango delihongo nongonono *Professor Eureka Rosenburg ko email: e.rosenburg@ru.ac.za*

Enyamukulo loye ta li hafifa ota li teelelwa neenghono

Woye

Mr. Trofimus Kaongo (Omulihongi-nongonono)

Appendix E: School Board Chairperson Approval

NB: This is a translation of the vernacular version into an English version from the school board chairperson as an approval of the research study to be conducted at the chosen research site. It was read to her by one of the teachers (a school board member) before she signed it.

SUBJECT: APPROVAL LETTER TO CONDUCT A RESEARCH STUDY AT [REDACTED]
SCHOOL

Dear Mr. Kaongo

I, Hilma Nikodemus, a chairperson of the school board committee from 2021 to date at [REDACTED] in Onesie Circuit in Omusati Region.

This letter serves to respond to the letter dated 24 May 2023 which was written to the school board chairperson in seeking for a permission to conduct a research study at [REDACTED]. This approval letter legitimates Trofim Kaongo to conduct his research study which is proposed to commence on July 2023 to November 2023 at [REDACTED] regarding the research question: *To what extent does involvement in the participatory action research process stimulate and expand democratic participation and the development of leadership in learners in a rural school in Omusati Region?*

This study intends to stimulate democratic participation and develop leadership opportunities in senior primary learners at our school. I am pleased with the purpose and the decision taken by the scholar for undertaking this study at the school mentioned above. I believe this study would enhance the leadership skills development in our learners in general and the teachers alike, as well as to all Namibian learners and educators respectively.

I am wishing him all the best during the conduct of his study

Yours Sincerely

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

[REDACTED]

Kuye Trofimus Kaongo

OSHIKALIMO: EPITIKILO LYOKUNINGILA EILONGONONGONONO POSIKOLA
YANANDIINOTYA PS

Ongame Hilma Nikodemus, ondi li omunashipundi gwetonatelonongelo posikola [REDACTED] yi li moshikandjolongo Onesi moshitopolwa shamusati, oku za momumvo 2021 sigo onena.

Ombapila ndjika otayi gandja epitikilo ku Trofimus Kaongo ngaashi e li indile momasiku 24 gaMei 2023, opo a ninge eilongonongonono lye posikola [REDACTED] moshitopolwa Omusati oku za muJuli sigo omuNovemba 2023(oomwedhi ntano). Eilongo ndika oli na sha nokupapudhula aalongwa yopetameko yondondo 4-7 ya vule okukutha ombinga mewiliko lyeilongo lyawo.

Ondu uvite uugumbo ketokolo e li kutha lyokugongela uuyebele mbuka posikola yatumbulwa pombanda. Eilongo lya tya ngeika ota li e ta uunongo mu ye, kaalongi pamwe naye, kaalongwa nosho wo kaaNamibia aayehe melongo.

Otandi halele eilongonongonono lye li ende nawa

MINISTRY OF EDUCATION

[REDACTED]

Gwoye

[REDACTED]

Appendix F: Teacher participant invitation letter

Appendix C: Consent letter to the teachers

Enq: Trofinus Kaongo
Cell: +264 81 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 May 2023

SUBJECT: INVITATION TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Participant

I am Trofinus Kaongo, a school principal at a Primary School in the Omusati Region. I am currently a Master's in Education (Educational Leadership & Management) scholar (19K8970) at Rhodes University in South Africa. In order to fulfill the criteria of this qualification I am required to conduct research in any area that interests me in the field of my study.

The purpose of the study is to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership opportunities in primary learners. The Namibian Education Act. 16 of 2001, makes a provision for the establishment of a Learner Representative Council which includes secondary school learners and is relatively silent on leadership of primary school learners. This prompted me to be interested in learner leadership development in primary school learners. Thus, the study intends to respond to the overarching research question: *To what extent does involvement in the participatory action research process stimulate and expand democratic participation and the development of leadership in learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?*

It is for this reason that, I hereby invite you to participate in the study which will take place at your school. The study targets senior primary learners, and all will be invited to participate voluntarily. The study will comprise three primary school teachers and possibly 15 learners. Even though the study targets 15 participants (learners), every senior primary learner will be given an opportunity to participate in the study.

The study will supposedly begin in July 2023 and end in February 2024 (8 months). The duration of the data generation process is expected to start from July 2023 to November 2023 (5 months) respectively and will be done in two phases. All activities pertain to the study will be carried out after school hours (14h00).

Phase 1: A contextual profiling phase will supposedly run from July 2023 to August 2023, and data will be generated as follows:

- I will hold one individual interview with you for a duration of 40-60 minutes after school hours.
- Interview session will be audio-recorded to capture every detail which I possibly omitted and then transcribed later.
- You will have access to the transcriptions if you may wish.

Consent you should be aware of:

- Permission to conduct the study is given by the school board and the directorate, perhaps it possesses low risks.
- Your participation in the study is voluntary and you may withdraw (if case be) with no consequences.
- Your identity will be anonymous, and the information provided will be kept confidential in accordance with the code of ethics for the university.
- The study will not interfere with the school curriculum and flexibility will be exercised.
- No rewards or compensation to be offered to you for your participation in the study.
- Signing this letter indicates that you accepted the invitation to participation.

I assure you that this study will not affect the school's character neither you in any way. In fact, the study would provide a lens to see to what extent the involvement of participatory action research sessions possibly stimulates their participation in leadership issues so that the practice may be applied to other schools in the region. The findings would benefit the school in particular in some ways and might be shared with other stakeholders to improve such practices at their institutions

It is therefore on this ground that, I sincerely request you to accept the invitation and I trust it will receive your utmost attention. For further enquiry, kindly contact my supervisor Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee at email address: f.kajee@ru.ac.za. Kindly sign the declaration below to validate your acceptance.

Should you have any concerns during the research the Chairperson of the Education Department Ethics Committee Professor Eureka Rosenberg may be contacted: e.rosenburg@ru.ac.za

Your acceptance of this invitation will be appreciated

Kindly'

Mr. Trofimius Kaongo (Researcher)

Declaration of acceptance

I (Full name of the teacher) hereby acknowledge receipt of this request and declare that I understand the nature of the study and the consent of the document. The researcher has explained the details carefully to me. I am satisfied with the ethics and understand that participation is voluntary.

.....
Signature of participant

.....
Date

.....
Signature of researcher

.....
Date

Appendix G: Assent letter to the learner

Appendix E: Assent letter to the learner

Child participant's assent form



Project Title: Stimulate democratic participation and develop leadership in senior primary learners

Researcher's name: Trofimus S. Kaongo

Name of participant:

Complete the form to use the questions asked by ticking under Yes or NO (✓)

Questions	Yes	No
Has the researcher explained the purpose of this research?		
Do you know why the researcher wants you to be part of the study?		
Are you aware that your identity will be anonymised and confidentiality will be upheld?		
Are you given a chance to raise your questions regarding the research?		
Are informed that you can withdraw from the study if you may wish without consequence or disciplinary measures?		
Do you know that the research will only be conducted after school hours?		
Has the researcher allowed you to express your views if you encounter challenges during the research process?		
Are you willing to take part in the research?		

Signature of Child

Date

Signature of researcher

Date

Appendix H: Consent letter to parents/guardians of learner participants

Appendix D: Consent letter to the Parents/Guardian

NB: Usually the language of communication is English in the school context, however, if a vernacular is preferred then I will change it to vernacular for easier comprehension by the parents/guardians.

Enq: Trofimus Kaongo
Cell: +26481 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 May 2023

SUBJECT: REQUEST FOR PERMISSION OF YOUR CHILD/ WARD TO PARTICIPATE IN A RESEARCH STUDY

Dear Parent/Guardian

I am Trofimus Kaongo, a school principal at a Primary School in the Omusati Region. I am currently a Master's in Education (Educational Leadership & Management) scholar (19K8970) at Rhodes University in South Africa. In order to fulfill the criteria of this qualification I am required to conduct research in any area that interests me in the field of my study.

The purpose of the study is to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership opportunities in primary learners. The Namibian Education Act. 16 of 2001, makes a provision for the establishment of a Learner Representative Council which include secondary school learners and is relatively silent on leadership of primary school learners. This prompted me to be interested in learner leadership development in primary learners. Thus, the study intends to respond the overarching research question: *To what extent does involvement in the participatory action research process stimulate and expand democratic participation and the development of leadership in senior primary learners in a rural school in the Omusati Region?*

Therefore, I hereby invite your child/wardto participate in the study which will take place at his/her school. The study targets senior primary learners who will be invited to participate voluntarily. The study will comprise three primary teachers, and possibly 15 learners as research participants. Even though, the study targets a minimum of 15 participants (learners), every interested learner will be given an opportunity to participate.

The study will supposedly begin in July 2023 and end in February 2024 (8 months). The duration of the data generation process is expected to start from July 2023 to November 2023 (5 months) respectively and will be done in two phases. All activities pertain to the study will be carried out after school hours (14h00).

Phase 1: A contextual profiling phase will supposedly run from July 2023 to August 2023, and data will be generated as follows:

- One focus group interview will be conducted with learners who will be divided into groups of four to five in a duration of approximately 60 minutes and will be conducted after school hours.
- Interview sessions will be audio-recorded to capture every detail which perhaps omitted and then transcribed later.
- Your child/ward will have access to the transcriptions if he/she may wish, else upon request by me.

Phase 2: Participatory action research sessions will be conducted from August 2023 to November 2023, and data will be generated as follow.

- There will be five workshop sessions which will be possibly conducted with 15 learner participants. The participants will discuss the findings gathered in phase 1 to find ways to stimulate democratic participation to develop leadership in the learners. The workshops are expected to be held once a week for a duration of 90 minutes after school working hours. Participants would decide on which weekday they prefer to meet to allow flexibility and possibly avoid clashing with other school activities. Furthermore, you (the parent) will be informed swiftly about the changes that might occur during the running of program.
- Learners will be observed while discussing issues during the workshops by three co-researchers (teachers).
- After each workshop, participants will reflect on the general discussion in their groups using a reflective journal sheet. Besides, I will make notes in my reflective journal notebook as well. In addition, some photos if agreed upon will be taken during the workshop sessions. However, the faces will be blurred out if utilised in the public domain.

Consent you should be aware of:

- Permission to conduct this study has been provided by the school board and the directorate.
- Your child/ward's participation in the study is voluntary, and he/she may withdraw (if the case be) with no consequences.
- Your child/ward identity and the information provided will be kept confidential in accordance with ethics for the university.
- The study will not interfere with his/her school curriculum and flexibility will be exercised.
- There is no reward or compensation to be given to your child/ward for his/her participation in the study.
- The information provided will be used only in the research project and will not be shared with a third party besides the research participants.

I assure you that this study will not affect the school's or your child/ward's character negatively. The study would provide a lens to see to what extent the involvement of participatory action research sessions possibly stimulates their participation in leadership issues so that the practice may be applied to other schools in the region. The findings would benefit the school in particular in some ways and might be shared with other stakeholders to improve such practices at their institutions.

I request you to accept the invitation and I trust it will receive your favourable consideration. Should you need to contact my supervisor Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee; she could be emailed *f.kajee@ru.ac.za*. I attached the provisional ethics clearance I obtained from Rhodes University approving this study. The Rhodes University Research Office can be contacted at *ethics-committee@ru.ac.za* if any concerns arise during the data collection process. Kindly read and sign the declaration below to validate your acceptance.

*Should you have any concerns during the research the Chairperson of the Education Department Ethics Committee Professor Eureka Rosenberg may be contacted: *e.rosenberg@ru.ac.za**

Your acceptance of this invitation will be appreciated

Kindly'

Mr. Trofimus Kaongo (Researcher)

Declaration of acceptance

I (Full name of parent/guardian) hereby acknowledge receipt of this request and declare that I understand the nature of the study and the consent of the document.

Hence, I grant permission to my child/ward (Learner's name) to participate in the study.

.....
Signature of parent/guardian

.....
Date

.....
Signature of researcher

.....
Date

Appendix H1: Translated consent letter to the parent/guardian

Appendix D 1: Translated consent letter to the parent/guardian

Omapulo: Trofimus Kaongo
Cell: +264 81 8031 457
Email address: kaongo81@gmail.com

P O Box 6016
Oshakati
Namibia
04 Mei 2023

OSHIKALIMO: Eindilo lepitikilo opo okaana/okatekulwa koye ka kufe ombinga melihongo-nongonono pofikola yeni

Kuye omudali/omutekuli

Aeme Trofimus Kaongo, omukulunhufikola pofikola Nandiinotya Primary School mOmusati Region. Ohandi lihongela odjapo yo Master Degree i na sha nelelo nosho ewiliko lehongo, onomola yange 19K8970, ondi li koshiputudilo Rhodes University mo South Africa. Opo nee ndiwanifepo oipumbwiwa yelihongo eli, ondi na oku ninga elihongo-nongonono mo shitukulwa shelihongo lange.

Elalakano lelihongo-nongonono eli oku papudula ovalihongi vehongo lopetameko (Ondondo 4-7) opo vakufe ombinga memanguluko voo vadule oku kufa ombinga mewiliko lelihongo lavo. Okatendo kelongo laNamibia, 16 ko 2001, oka yandja oufemba kokangudu kalelipo kovanafikola meesekundofikola opo vakufe ombinga meewiliko leefikola davo, ashike i na aka yandja omhito kovalihongi vehongo lopetameko. Eshi osha xwaxwameka nge opo ndi papudule eemhito dewiliko movalihongi vehongo lopetameko. Onghene, elihongo-nongonono e li ota li wilikwa kepulo: *Fiyo opo nghatu ili ovalihongi vehongo lopetameko tava dulu oku kufa ombinga yamanguluka opo va dule okuvilika ta shi pitile mekufombinga lavo lexwaxwameko lelihongo-nongonono eli?*

Onghene ohandi pula epitikilo ku ove opo okaana/omudali waopo a kufe ombinga melihongo-nongonono pofikola yavo. Elihongo-nongonono e li o la nhuninwa ovahongwa veengudu do petameko (ondodo 4-7) no ta ve keliyamba paumwene. Elihongo-nongonono eli ola kwatelamo ovahongi veendodo dopetameko vatatu novalongwa 15. Ovahongwa aveshe vo petameko ota va pewa omhito opo vakufe ombinga, ashike ohandi ka pumbwa ovahongwa 15 melihongo-nongonono eli. Elihongo-nongonono eli ola kwatelamo yoo ovalongi vatatu veendodo dopetameko nomuyandjimaye umweota li ka kwafela ovanafikola vopofikola ei vakaninge ovawiliki vawa..

Elihongo-nongonono e li ota li ka tameka mu Juli 2023 fiyo Febuluali 2024. Eongelo lomauelele ota li tameke mu Juli 2023 fiyo omu Novomba 2023 (eemwedi 5), no ta shi ka ningwa momalweefo avari. Oinyangadalwa aishe ota yi ka ningwa konima yeetundi (14h00).

Olweefo 1: oku ongela omauelele ope tameko ota a tameke mu Juli 2023 fiyo Aguste 2023, no ta shi ka enda nee ngaha.

- Omapulapulo oshikando shimwe ashike, ovahongwa poungudu unhe (4) oulefimbo leeminute 60. Omapulapulo opaungudu ota a longifa efimbo lixupi kuyelekanifa paunwe. Ovahongwa ngeno ota va kala mounghudu valumbakana pamadiladilo.
- Omawi avo otaa ka kufwako opo a ka tulwe miitya pombapila konima yefimbo.
- Ovakufimbinga ota va ka efelwa op ova tale nghene omawi avo a tulwa pombapila osho va tumbula momapulaapululo.

Olweefo 2: Eetundi dexwaxwameko lelihongo-nongonono e li ota di tameke mu Aguste 2023 fiyo Novomba 2023.

- Eetundi-ilonga dili 5 ota di ka kalwa kovahongwa 15. Meetundi-ilonga dotete ota mu likundwa omauyelele a ongelwa molweefo lotete, opo nee ta ku twikilwa neenghambadala do ku uya po nexwaxwameko lokukufa ombinga pamanguluko lovahongwa. Eetundi-ilonga ota di kalako lunwe moshivike oule weeminute 90 (14h00-15h30). Ovakufimbinga ota va ka tulapo efiku olo levawapalela, ashike omalunduluko otaa dula okuningwa apa tashi wapalele no toka shiivifilwa.
- Ovahongwa otava ka ninga etalululo koninima yeetundi-ilonga oikando itatu paungudu vavo, tava ka hadeke meembapila. Natango ohandi ka ninga etalululo nghene eetundi-ilonga da enda medidilikwambo lange. Ota ku ka kufwa yoo omafano ovakufimbinga meetundi ilonga edi papitikilo lavo, ashike oipala yavo ota yi ka uvikwa opo iha monike membwalangadjo.

Koneka:

- Eefelo lokuninga elihongo-nongonono e li ola yandjwa nale ketonatonongelo no kombelewa yewiliko yehongo .
- Okaana/omutekulwa woye ota ka kufa ombinga pahalo laye, ashike oku na yoo oufemba wo ku likufamo efimbo keshe pehena oshilanduli.
- Ouyelele kombinga yokaana/omutekulwa woye ota a ka kwatwa nawa ngaashi sha u fwa koshiputudilo shelongo.
- Elihongo-nongonono e li i ta li kaya ehongo moshipala nelunduluko keshe ota li ka ningwa apa sha pumbiwa
- I ta pa ka yandjwa omaano a sha, oku ninga a holokapo.
- Omauyelele a ongelwa melihongo-nongonono e li i ta ka andjanekwa komunhu omutitatu pehena epitikilo lomukufimbinga.

Ohandi kwashilipaleke kutya ashishe eshi tashi ningwa ita shi ka nyana nande omukufimbinga ile ofikola eyi. Elihongo-nongonono eli ota li ka yandja onengelelo oku mona kutya ovanafikola vopetameko otava dula okulela fiyo openi meekufombinga lamanguluka tashi pitile meetundi-ilonga opo yo oshidjemo shi andjanekwe neefikola dikwao. Oshidjemo sheetundi longa edi otashi ka kwafela ofikola momikalo dihapu no ta yi ka andjanekelwa koiputudilohongo ikwao.

Pexulilo, ohandi fiindilemo kutya elihongo-nongonono e li i ta li ka ya oilonga yofikola moshipala nomalunduluko ota a ka ningwa apa shapumbiwa. Ohandi ke li ufa komikanghalandu delihongo-nongonono e li, ngaashi oku holeka omaukwatya ovakufimbinga. Ovakufimbanga ota va ka pewa omhito yo ku li kufamo meelihongo-nongonono e li pe he na oshilanduli.

Ongene ohandi indile eefelo opo ndi ninge elihongo-nongonono lange mofikola yange nondelineekela eindilo e li ota mu lifimaneke. Omapulo a wedwapo, kwatafana nomukwafelimhongo wange, Dr. Farhana Amod Kajee ko email address:

f.kajee@ru.ac.za. Oto dulu yoo okukwatafana nomunashipundi wokangudu komilandumango delihongo nongonono
Professor Eureta Rosenburg ko email: e.rosenburg@ru.ac.za

Ediminino loye keindilo e li ota li teelwa

Woye

Mr. Trofimus Kaongo (Omulihongi-nongonono)

Ekwashilipaleko letambuleko

Ame (Edina lomudali/omufilishisho) handi tambulako eindilo e li no
handi ana kutya ondiuditeko elalakano lombapila ei. Onghene, ohandi yandje epitikilo kokaana/omutekulwa
..... (Edina lokaana/omutekulwa) opo a kufe ombinga.

.....
Eshaino lomudali

.....
Efiku

.....
Eshaino lomulihongi-nongonono

.....
Efiku

Appendix I: Critical friend confidentiality agreement form

Appendix F: Confidentiality Agreement Letter for a critical friend

Researcher's name (Principal researcher): Trofimus S. Kaongo

Name of Critical Friend:

Dear Critical Friend

As a critical friend of this research study, you should acquaint yourself well with the content of this letter and complete where it is needed.

1. Being a critical friend in the research study, you will be able to engage with and discuss the following:

- Verify the transcription made from audio records (interviews).
- An analysis of the preliminary findings
- Agree or disagree with the interpretation and presentation of data by the researcher.
- Discuss any concerns or points of reflection on the research journey.

2. The researcher has explained the followings: (Tick where appropriate ✓)

Areas of assessment	Yes	No
The role of a critical friend in the study		
Ethics pertaining to the study		
Participation is voluntarily		
Duration of the study		
Withdrawal is allowed with no consequences		

3. Consent you should be aware of and agree to:

- Keep confidential information of the study which is shared with me.
- Keep any information secure while it is in my possession in accordance with the instructions of the researcher; acknowledging that I will not have full access to the data.
- The researcher will share as he deems fit.
- Conceal the identity of research participants, unless with the permission of the researcher.
- I will inform the researcher of any potential risks so that the situation can be addressed promptly.
- Carry out the job description as per the directives of the researcher.

Declaration of acceptance

I (Full name of the teacher) hereby acknowledge receipt of this request and declare that I understand the nature of the study and the consent of the document.

.....
Signature of a critical friend

.....
Date

.....
Signature of researcher

.....
Date

Appendix J: Individual teacher's interview

1. How long have you been teaching at this school?
2. What school activities do you observed being led by learners?
3. How do you understand the following concepts?

(a) Learner leadership (b) Learner voice
4. Learner participation is an important aspect of democratic education; how do you understand the concept learner democratic participation?
5. Do you think that learners in the school democratically participate in school activities?
Elaborate
6. Please may you share some activities that learners engage in, which provide them with an opportunity to lead?
7. When learners are assigned to certain school projects, are they supervised by teachers?
Elaborate.
8. Have you ever noticed a case where learners wanted to lead themselves on certain activities?
If yes, explain. Describe the activity fully.
9. Are there opportunities where they make decisions together with their teachers? Explain.
10. Are there beneficial effects of learner democratic participation in school activities? Explain.
11. If learner democratic participation is absent in school decision-making processes, does it affect the school and how?

Thank you for your time in this regard!

Appendix K: Focus group learners' interview

1. How long have you been at this school?
2. During your years at school what school activities were you involved in?
3. In what school activities were you involved in as a leader?
4. During leading these activities, was there someone appointed to direct you?
5. How do you feel when somebody tries to assist you on a particular activity without you asking for help? If yes, who was it?
6. Do teachers give you the full authority to lead a certain task without their involvement? If so, what are they?
7. Do teachers and fellow learners listen to you whenever you lead a certain activity, and why?
8. Did you ever sit together with the teachers to discuss certain school programme/activity? If so, how does it feel?
9. Can you share any examples where decisions are made by teachers upon the learners without your consultation? If so, how does this affect you?
10. What school practices discourage you to be democratically participative in school activities?
11. What school practices motivate you to be democratically participative in school projects?
12. Learner participation is an important aspect of democratic education, how do you understand the concept
learner democratic participation?
13. How do you understand the following concepts?
(a) learner leadership (b) learner voice

Thank you for your time in this regard!

Appendix L: Learner Reflective Journal

No	Focus areas	Reflection
1	How do you feel when interaction with your fellow learners during the workshop?	
2	Do you consider everybody's ideas in your group when discussing issues? (How)	
3	Does every member participate and make decisions in your group? (How)	
4	How do you help those members which are not participating?	
5	Do you willingly participate in the discussion? (Motivate)	
6	Mention areas in which conducting workshop improved your participation	
7	In which way do you want the researcher to help you?	
Other reflections		

Thank you for your time in this regard!

Appendix M: Researcher reflective journal (JN)

OBSERVATION SCHEDULE

No	Areas of observation	What Observed		Motivation
		Yes	No	
1	Do learners look enthusiastic about the workshops?			
2	Do you notice any change in learners regarding their participation?			
3	Do learners actively engage in discussions?			
4	Do learners consider the ideas of every member of the team?			
5	Do learners willingly interact in groups or forced by fellow learners?			
6	Do workshops make any positive improvement regarding learners' participation?			
7	Is the gender power struggle observed during interaction while they are carrying out the activities?			
8	Do learners work independently on their activities with less or no assistance from their teachers?			

Any other observations

.....

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Thank you for your time in this regard!