

## **The Defining Qualities of Learner leadership at School Level**

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**Abstract:** Schools are dynamic institutions whose leadership approach draws representation from different constituents of the school. One of the constituents that has received momentum in recent years is learner leadership, which involves giving learners a voice to participate in the management and leadership activities of their schools. The purpose of the study was to establish the qualities essential for learner leadership within a school context, with the aim of cultivating learner leadership structures that draws on learners with established learner leadership qualities. A case study design was used as a methodology for the research, whose sample comprised of a school principal, teachers and learners of Oshana Region. All participants were selected using purposive sampling. The data was collected with document analysis, semi-structured questionnaires, interviews, observation and journaling. The collected data was analysed by establishing themes.

The study established that learner leadership is associated with specific human resources capabilities related to influencing, leading, directing and motivating other learners at school. Good learner leadership requires an established learner who is exemplary and a role model for other learners. In addition, learner leadership is about having the power to enforce compliance with school rules and regulations. As informed by traditional theories on leadership, learner leadership can be made possible by innate qualities as can be evident with individual learners, making them electable candidates to learner leadership positions. It becomes evident that learner leadership comes with specific leadership qualities, begging the need to elect learners to learner leadership structures on the basis of established learner leadership qualities for successful execution of leadership responsibilities.

**Keywords:** Learner leadership, Learner Representative Council, LRC, Leadership, Management, Learner voice, Learner leader

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### **1. Background of the study**

The concept of learner leadership is often used interchangeably with the term student agency, student voice and student participation (Black, Walsh, Magee, Hutchins, Berman & Groundwater-Smith, 2014). Some literature uses the term 'student' instead of 'learners'. The term 'learners' is used in this study, since in Namibian context, the term 'learner' refers to any person who is registered and receiving basic education or a course of study, which is normally a formal education provided from the level of first grade to the level of the twelfth grade (Namibia. MoEAC, 2020). In terms of leadership, Shatilova (2014) and Uushona (2012) argues that there is no singular or generic definition of learner leadership, as authors tend to define learner leadership differently. Knott-Craig (2007) advanced a quality student leadership model which pinpoints three key stages in adolescents' leadership development. The first stage is awareness which involves adolescents becoming aware of their leadership potential, as well as the necessity to be trained in leadership styles and skills; the second stage is the expansion in leadership capacity through widening social interaction with related type of training; the third stage is about undertaking the responsibilities through doing and tackling projects that demonstrate leadership. The aim of the model is to recognise the type of support and learning the adolescent leaders may need at each stage. The model places learners at its centre and claims that learner empowerment through participation is crucial to leadership development.

A part from defining learner leadership on the basis of models, other scholars define learner leadership on the basis of salient characteristics (Uushona, 2012). The characteristics that define learner leadership are outlined below:

- It is a relational process;
- It involves interaction and building relationships with other learners, peer leaders and other members of the school;
- It involves external community;
- It has an outcome of developing leadership skills in learners;
- It involves many types of leadership;
- It may develop through participation.

In addition to the defining characteristics above, learner leadership is defined by Shatilova (2014) as giving learners a voice to undertake decision-making and empowering them to transform social norms in their schools. Drawing insights from the definitions by various authors, (Knott-Craig, 2007; Uushona, 2014; Shatilova, 2014), it becomes clear that learner leadership involves learners taking leadership responsibilities in their school communities. For learners to play leadership roles, they require an opportunity to make their voice heard in the management and leadership of their schools, hence the concept 'learner voice'. Learner voice is described by Fielding (2004, p. 197) as an "apparent desire to encourage young people to articulate their concerns and aspirations about a whole range of matters that has the potential to offer an important contribution to education". Similarly, Mitra (2007) and Mitra and Gross (2009) describe learner voice as the many ways in which youth could actively participate in school decisions that will shape their lives and the lives of their peers.

In a similar vein, Grant (2015) states that learner voice explains the diversities of ways in which learners can share decision-making in schools. Learner voice is the medium through which learners are able to take part in the management of the affairs of their schools. Without giving learners a voice, the idea of learner leadership cannot be realised, and what cannot be realised do not exist in the first place. Hence, the advocacy models and theories of learner leadership requires that learners are given a voice in the management and leadership of their schools. Learner voice manifests in different forms within school communities, relating to activities that encourage reflection, discussion, dialogue and action on matters that primarily concern learners (Fielding 2004). In addition, learner leadership requires including learners in all efforts that influence the core activities and structures of their schools (Mitra, 2007). In a school setting, Mitra and Gross (2009) explain three stages involved in learners' voice. The stages are; being heard, collaborating with adults and building capacity for leadership. The stages are illustrated by the Figure 1 below.

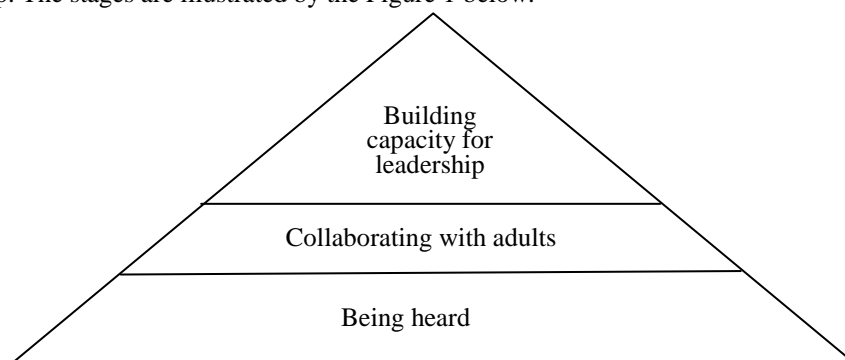


Figure 1: Pyramid of learners' voice  
Source: Mitra & Gross (2009, p. 523)

As can be seen in Figure 1 above, firstly learners need to be heard by encouraging them to express their opinions about issues affecting them and empowering them to advocate for change. Secondly, learner voice manifest in their collaboration with adults to address problems within the schools or seek changes around their schools. Thirdly, learner voice can be made possible through involving learners in leadership building activities aiming at developing learner leadership capabilities. The pyramid of learners' voice is established as fitting well with the distributed leadership which nurtures leadership development among learners (Grant & Nekondo, 2016).

Giving learners a voice in schools through learner leadership interventions presents numerous benefits (Mitra, 2007; Hine, 2011). Learner leadership has the potential to improve learner academic results and school reconstruction through shared leadership. Giving and hearing learners in school affairs, engenders a sense of pride in their school as they start to feel that they are really part of the school and their contribution is valued and appreciated. Learner leadership also provide adults with valuable insights into the dynamics of the school, through the lens of learners. The valuable insights helps to ensure a balanced and holistic understanding of the dynamics facing the schools. Scholarships have proven that learners who have limited opportunities for democratic voice in the educational process, feel their lives, beliefs and hopes are undervalued by schools, and hence develop hostility towards such school (Grant, 2015). Thus, learner voice plays a very significant role, as it offers real democratic values within schools, leading to active learner participation in the development of their schools.

The above evidence proves that learner leadership is one of the essential ingredients of school management and leadership. Despite the significance of involving learners in the leadership of the school being well documented in other parts of the world, little is known about what constitute learner leadership in the Namibian context. The traits essential for learner leadership are yet to be established to ensure that learner

leadership structures in Namibian schools absorbs learners with proven leadership qualities. The absence of an established learner leadership framework in Namibia necessitated this study to establish the qualities required of learners to become agents of learner leadership in schools, as learner leaders with the potential of optimising on learner voice for the mutual benefits of both the school, teachers, learners and all stakeholders in education.

The next section presents the methodology used for the study.

## **2. Research methodology**

The methods and techniques used for the study are described according to the following outline:

### **2.1 Research design**

A qualitative research approach was used for the study, whose empirical investigation made use of a case study, as an intensive analysis and description of a single phenomenon for an enriched understanding of what is going on with the phenomenon (Simons, 2009; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2000). The case study design was the ideal research design as the researchers intended to obtain intensive description of essential learner leadership traits at schools. The case study design enabled researchers to acquire a comprehensive understanding of how participants relates to the subject being studied, and how they interact with each other in their specific situation (Maree, 2007; Simons, 2009). The interaction with different teachers and learners brought rich multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of learner leadership traits in a real-life context.

Since case study help researchers set boundary for their studies (Berg, 2001), the researchers were able to focus on a particular, specific group of learners which was the Learner Representative Council (LRC) members. The set boundaries helped researchers concentrating and focusing on the participants and the essential requirements for becoming a member of the LRC. In addition, the flexibility inherent in case study designs (Maree, 2007), allowed the study to be conducted for numerous days and collected data at different times and places during the research for a richer analysis and an enriched understanding of the phenomenon that was studied. The flexibility also allowed researchers to use multiple sources of data and different techniques in the data gathering process, which enhanced the validity of the data collected and subsequent results.

Despite the benefits case studies, case study investigations are associated with certain limitations. The findings of case studies cannot be generalised (Maree, 2007). This limitation does not apply to this study as the researchers had no intentions to quantify the findings and generalise them over large a population. The findings were meant for application to the specific population from which they were collected. Notwithstanding the centrality of the findings for the case studied, researchers provided a thick description as a measure of minimising limitations related to generalisation of findings (Rule & John, 2011). In reporting the research process, researchers provided adequate and rich information related to the research processes, findings and conclusions to enable other scholars and readers gain a level of reader-determined transferability, if they believe that the research processes and setting, as well as the established findings resonates quite well with other cases familiar to them. Reader-determined transferability implies that readers can infer from the detailed descriptions of the study as provided, whether the findings are applicable to their settings, without necessarily being provided with statistical accounts which are traditionally associated with generalisation.

The next section presents the research site and participants of the study.

### **2.2 Sampling and participants**

The sample was made up of seventeen participants, which comprised of twelve Learner Representative Council members at the school, who were all learners and were considered as the primary participants; two other learners who were class monitors and were involved in piloting the questionnaires; the School Principal, a Head of Department (HoD), and the Liaison teacher for the LRC. Purposive sampling was used as a sampling technique, which enabled researchers to select individuals for the sample, depending on the characteristics that the researchers were looking for (Gay, Mills, & Airasian, 2009). The criteria that informed sampling included leadership positions, leadership potential and the ability to provide better insight about the phenomenon of the study. Purposive sampling made it possible to choose participants that were knowledgeable of the data needed for the study (Maree, 2007). LRC members were chosen because they were the focus of the study. The principal and the HoD were better positioned in the school management and were thus knowledgeable of the leadership practices at the school. The Liaison teacher was a focal teacher to the LRC members, charged with the function of mentoring, coaching and guiding LRC members within the school, and was thus well acquainted with the qualities required for learner leadership. The purposive nature of the sampling decisions in respect of the research site and participants enabled researchers to obtain the richest possible source of information fit for addressing the intents of the study.

The data was collected with the data collection techniques as described in the following section.

### **2.3 Data collection techniques**

The data for the study was collected using document analysis, semi-structured questionnaires, interviews, observation and journaling. The range of data collection tools was valuable for the study, as it allowed the methods to offset their respective weaknesses and capitalised on their individual strengths, which practice strengthened the validity of findings. In addition, the counter balance that comes with multiple methods provided rich and meaningful data for analysis, presentation, interpretation and discussion. With the permission of participants, an audio recorder and camera were used for data capturing. The specific data collection techniques are detailed next.

#### **Document analysis**

Document analysis is a systematic procedure for reviewing or evaluating relevant printed or electronic material for extracting information useful for answering the research questions (Bowen, 2009). Specific documents were analysed in order to gather evident information on leadership opportunities that existed at the school. The document analysis further provided researchers with useful insights of the school, which then informed the design and administration of other data collection techniques.

#### **Semi-structured questionnaires**

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), a semi-structured questionnaire has some open-ended questions that participants may answer as they like, in the space reserved. The purpose of the semi-structured questionnaire is to enable the researchers to standardise the questions asked, while at the same time control the amount of information that the respondents provides (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). All twelve Learner Representative Council members were given the questionnaires and they provided a “written collection of self-report” based on the questions asked (Gay, Mills & Airasian, 2009, p. 373). The questions revolved around the learner leadership and learner voice at school.

#### **Individual interviews**

Thomas (2009) defines interviews as a discussion with someone from which the researcher tries to get information useful for answering the research questions. Interview is a conversation with a purpose of obtaining needed information. Interview enable participants to discuss their interpretations of the world in which they live, and to express to the researchers how they regard situations from their own point of view (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). The study used interviews which were conducted with the Liaison teacher, Head of Department and School Principal. The interviews was conducted during break-times.

Interviewing teachers assisted in gathering an understanding of teachers on the subject of learner leadership, as well as obtaining essential information on leadership opportunities in the school. The interview was used with other techniques of gathering data with a motive of triangulating the data collected. Furthermore, semi-structured interviews provided opportunities to ask prepared questions according to the interview schedule, while at the same time gave the benefit of probing from participants for clarifications (Thomas, 2009). The interview allowed a probe for detailed information on the past, present and future leadership opportunities and capabilities of learners at the case study school.

#### **Observation schedule**

Observation is defined as the process of gathering open-ended, firsthand information related to the study, by observing people and places at a research site (John, 2014). Observation examines behavioural patterns of people in certain situations to obtain information about the phenomenon of interest (Johnson & Christensen, 2012). The researchers observed LRC meetings, staff briefings, morning devotions, rotational processes and Change Laboratory sessions. During these observations, researchers noted down striking features about leadership relations in terms of gender, grade, language and portfolios. Observation is a method of generating data which entails the researcher getting fully involved in a research setting, in order to experience and observe first-hand ranges of dimensions in and of that setting (Mason, 2002). The researchers were participant observers, which implies researchers participating in the situation, while observing and collecting data on the activities (Gay et al., 2009). Being participant observers helped in gaining better insights and developing working relationships with the participants, which relationship might not have been attained without being participant observers in the study.

Observation was beneficial for the study for three main reasons; it provided an opportunity to record information as it occurs in a setting; it enabled researchers to study actual behaviours, and; it enabled researchers to study individuals who have difficulty verbalising their ideas (John, 2014s). The researchers were able to record the information on learner leadership development from participants based on the live data as they were derived from observation in real time (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000). The observation was an ideal

data collection method since it assisted to compare and verify what was said with what was actually happening on the school grounds, and further afforded an opportunity to triangulate with data collected using other data collection techniques.

### **Journaling**

Journaling requires researchers to be self-reflective in the conduct of their research (Janesick, 1999). The technique allowed researchers to reflect on the research process as it progressed. The researchers were able to note down the positives, the negatives, what the process meant to them at specific times, and what was learned from the experiences. The advantage of keeping the journal is that it offers "interesting and vivid experiences that may be subjective, however, bringing them up front allows future researchers to find ways around problems in their own research" (Berg, 2001). The researchers noted down their journey during Change Laboratory workshops, as well as throughout the research process to intensify professional awareness, and allow for informed professional decision-making (Borg, 2001). The journaling was able to contribute to the study by providing useful insights for the interpretations and discussions of the findings.

### **2.4 Data Analysis**

Data analysis is the process of making sense of the data collected (Merriam, 1998). Data analysis involves the researchers conducting a data reduction process by selecting, simplifying and transforming the raw data as gathered in the field (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The data collected was analysed inductively, by establishing themes. During the inductive thematic analysis, the raw data was examined, labeled and coded according to the responses of the respective research questions (Rule & John, 2011). The data set were coded on sticky notes which were later pasted into a visual form for an enriched understanding of emergent findings. The coded portions of data were then grouped logically into categories, which were constructed based on patterns and similarities emerging from data (Merriam, 1998). Thereafter, themes were created as research findings. After creating themes, the researchers scanned through the data again several times to look for other pertinent information that could enhance the interpretation, and in the process, more categories were formed for a richer interpretation and discussion processes (Lichtman, 2014). The themes were interpreted and discussed drawing useful insights from the theoretical frameworks, citing empirical evidence as reviewed, and backing up the discussions with verbatim excerpts of the participants. Relating the discussion to the theories helped to validate the theoretical framework as adopted as well as confirming the correctness of the literature reviewed as it correlated with current research establishments.

The trustworthiness of the results was established through the measures described in the following section.

### **2.5 Trust worthiness of findings**

To ensure the credibility of the results, the study collected sufficient data using multiple data collection techniques and the resultant discussions provided were rigorous enough to provide convincing justifications. Two class monitors were given questionnaires prior to the main study as piloting. The piloting was done with the intention "to check for clarity and to remove ambiguities" in the data collection technique (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011, p. 402). Elimination of ambiguities in the data collection techniques means that the questions were clearly understood by the respondents and correct answers were thus provided. Interviews were recorded and the participants were given an opportunity to change any wording that they felt did not capture the exactness of their words and intentions. A very good rapport was built with the participants before the commencement of the interviews, which ensured that participants were open to express their ideas freely to the researchers. The use of data triangulation, which is the use of multiple methods to collect data, strengthened the validity of the qualitative data (Gay et al., 2009). The data sets were corroborated by relating findings from one data collection technique to the data collected with another technique (van der Mescht, 2002). Collaboration ensures congruence of the data, eventually producing results that draws on the strengths of individual data collection techniques.

In addition, one of the researchers works for the Ministry of Education, Arts and Culture, which exposed the researcher to insider positionality in the study, as the researcher has also previously worked at the school. According to Chavez (2008, p. 475), insider positionality is about "sharing multiple identities such as race, ethnicity, and class with participants". The advantage of insider positionality was that the researcher had commonalities with the participants which helped obtaining efficacious data from the participants. The influence of the researcher was minimised by building rapport with the teacher participants before the interview, and by code switching to using Oshiwambo, the language that the participants were most comfortable with.

## **2.6 Ethical considerations**

All the participants were treated with respect and dignity. The researchers explained all the details of the study to the participants so that participants were well informed with the intentions of the study, to enable them to make an informed and conscious decision whether to participate in the study or not. Permission to research site was obtained. A permission to conduct research in a site does not substitute the informed consent of participants (Wassenaar, 2007). Hence, informed consents were obtained from the parents and teachers as well as assenting from learners.

As the participants indicated they wished to have their true identities concealed, pseudonyms were used for both the school and the participants in the reporting of the findings. The interview with the mentor teacher is captured as IMT, interview with the school principal is captured as IPR, and the interview with the Head of Department is captured as IHOD. The questionnaires that were administered to respective LRC members are captured as LQ1-12. Findings collected with different techniques were also coded differently, such as DA1-7 for document analysis, JE1-7 for journal entries and OBN1-2 for observation notes. Participants were informed of the confidentiality of the data and were assured that the data would not be made public, and will be stored in a locked desk drawer and backed up as soft (digital) copies and saved on the cloud. The next section presents the discussions of the findings that were established.

## **3. Discussion of findings**

The study focused on learner leadership traits at school level. The data from the empirical investigation and the literature study was analysed inductively and arrived at four thematic areas. Firstly; leadership is about having certain abilities such as influencing, leading, directing and motivating others. Secondly, leadership is about being a role model and setting good examples to others. Thirdly, leadership is about having power to influence adherence to school rules, and fourthly, leadership is innate. The themes are discussed below.

### **3.1 Learner leadership is about manifesting specific qualities**

The study established that learner leadership comes with a set of qualities, which defines the uniqueness of learner leaders. Not everyone who is called a learner in the school community can become a learner leader as learner leaders should meet specific qualities that can enable them to perform their leadership roles successfully. Most of the participants indicated that learner leadership was about having certain human resource capabilities which included the ability to influence, lead, direct, guide and motivate other learners at school in particular and community at large. Learner leadership requires a learner who have the “*ability to influence others*” (LQ6), “*the ability to guide, direct and influence other learners in a positive way*” (LQ10), and someone who is “*involved in directing and guiding others*”(IMT). It becomes clear that learner leadership involves “*a group of learners who are entrusted with a responsibility of leading others and provide guidance*” (IPR).

The findings of what constitute learner leadership in schools concurred with the view expressed in literature that leadership is a process of influencing others (Bush, 2003, Spillane, 2005; Christie, 2010; Gillies, 2013). Influencing and leading other learners should lead to a positive situations and outcomes, and other learners should be “*guided well*” (LQ10) ... “*in order to achieve a better future*” (LQ11). This implies that learner leadership requires someone who is “*leading others so that they can improve themselves, making them do something that their future self will thank them for*” (LQ2). This view resonates well with the arguments of Gillies (2013) that leadership is related to people and their conduct in order to effect required change.

Motivation is another important function of learner leadership. Learners elected into learner leadership structure should be able to motivate other learners to succeed. The ability to motivate others is one of the important trait that learner leaders should possess to be able to shape humanity for the better. Learner leadership is about “*encouraging and motivating other learners to do the right things at school*” (LQ1, LQ5, IPR & LQ7). The above views fits well with de Villiers (2010) who mentions that leadership influences motivation, therefore those that are entrusted with leadership roles should ensure that they motivate other learners from time to time. The ability to motivate other learners and bring the best out of them relates to the transformational leadership theory, which advocates for leaders to inspire their subordinates and make them the best team they can be (Tng, 2009).

It becomes evident that learner leadership requires a blend of certain qualities that potential learner leaders should be able to demonstrate in order to carry out their leadership roles successfully. Without possessing the established learner leadership requirements, learner voice cannot be optimally utilised and cannot benefit learner population. Thus, the selection of learner leaders should consider learners who have proven to be potential leaders in respect of the required learner leadership qualities. Identifying learners with leadership qualities and utilise them by giving them a voice in school leadership is essential in making sure that the school

draws insights from contemporary leadership thinking, distributed leadership in particular, which optimises on all available leaders to initiate and bring about required changes.

The next section presents another thematic area on learner leadership quality, being a role model.

### **3.2 Learner leadership is about being a role model**

Learner leadership requires a person who is able to set a good example for other learners to emulate and follow their footsteps. LRC members as learner leaders, are expected to be exemplary to other learners in the school community and beyond. A learner leader is someone who is capable of playing “*the biggest role of being an exemplary learner*” to others (LQ1, LQ2, LQ6 & LQ10). Learner leadership is about setting good examples to other learners and having good behaviours. The LRC members are expected to behave well and set a good example that other learners can emulate. The quality of being a role model to others supports literature evidence that a leader has to lead by example, be it by working harder or by being at the forefront of events (Hermalin, 1998). In order to illustrate leading by example, one could for instance use the person of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., a civil rights activist who is well known for the speech ‘*I have a dream*’ and for being at the forefront of civil rights marches in the USA (ibid.). The civil rights activist was known to lead other people by being at the forefront of protests. In a school situation, the LRC members are expected to be leading the school activities, events and functions ahead of other learners. Other learners would then follow what the LRC members are doing.

In ensuring that the LRC members stood out from other learners to make it easier for other learners to see them and to follow the examples, the case study school implemented several measures to ensure that LRC members served as role models for other learners. It was established through document analysis that the school purchased blazers for Head boy, Head girl and their Deputies (DA5). Journaling entries established that all the LRC members have name tags attached to their school uniforms to make it easier for other learners to identify them (JE1). In addition, the LRC members were dressed differently from the rest of the learners as a symbol of leadership and identification. The school tried to ensure that the LRC members were not only neatly dressed but that they remained visible on the school grounds. This study argues that the LRC members were setting a good example, thus leadership was taking place and other learners were looking up to them. The argument is in line with the contingency theory of leadership which suggests that leaders are responsible for helping followers develop appropriate behaviour (Horner, 1997). Leading by example is considered a vital component of leadership across diverse work settings, including learner leadership.

The next section presents another thematic area on learner leadership as having power to enforce adherence to school rules.

### **3.3 Learner leadership is about the exercise of power to enforce school rules**

Schools are institutions governed by a set of rules and regulations, to which learners are prone to contravene. Learner leadership is about having some kind of power to ensure that other learners follow the school rules. The LRC members should be able to exercise “*power to ensure school rules*” (LQ12) and “*policies and regulations*” are followed (DA3), because learner leaders are “*given power to control others learners*” (IHOD). Similarly, a learner respondent also understood what it required to be a learner leader by revealing that “*leadership is when a person has power to lead*” (LQ4), supported by LQ3 who echoed the same revelation that LRC members were taking “*control of everything that cannot be seen by teachers or principal, as LRC were there as the eyes of the school to make sure that everything within the school was going well*”. Given the fact that the learner population is generally high than the population of the teachers and support staff members, learner leaders should be able to control other learners and enforce discipline in the absence of teachers. This implies that learner leadership is viewed as a support arm for teachers to enforce rules. The supporting role of learner leaders in maintaining disciplines concurs with Fielding (2004, p. 205) who states that “*student voice is primarily an instrument of school effectiveness driven by adult purposes*”. Hence being a member of the LRC requires commitment to be used as an instrument to enforce rules for school effectiveness.

In ensuring that LRC members exercise power, it was observed that once the bell rang, LRC members took leadership to control and order other learners to move into their classes. LRC members also controlled how other learners put on school uniform and ensured that the school uniform was dressed properly. Without given power by the school authority, and without having the ability to exercise such power, it would have been difficult for LRC members to compel other learners to comply with school rules. Learner leadership can be viewed as controlling and ensuring that there is order in the school. Therefore, LRC members should be given power to make their voice heard. In addition, learners elected to learner leadership positions should be able to use their positional power to influence the behaviours and attitude of other learners at school. However, the issue of power might be deemed unnecessary if the school uses distributed leadership which emphasis other people to take on leadership responsibilities on their own (Spillane, 2006). This study argues that distributed

leadership may work well with adults, but learners may still need to be controlled given their juvenile characteristics.

The next section presents another thematic area of learner leadership as being an innate character.

### **3.4 Learner leadership is about manifesting innate leadership characters**

The findings that leadership is an innate quality was limited in scope as it was emphasised by one participant only. However, the revelation is considered significant and interesting as it was raised by the school principal. The school principal stated that “*leadership qualities are inherited, it is an inherited kind of thing*” (IPR). In addition, the participant indicated that the LRC “*capability supposed to be inherently in there*” (IPR), further adding that LRC members were elected because they “*displayed to others learners their inherited character*” of being a leader (IPR). The revelation that leadership is innate bear validity since LRC members were elected on their typicality to leadership on the basis of other learners’ observations.

The findings of leadership being an inborn trait echoes with the traditional views on leadership which asserts people are born with inherent characteristics that makes them leaders (Knott-Craig, 2007). Consequently, the individuals who are born with leadership qualities would ultimately display those qualities, making others elect them to leadership positions (Ibid). The traditional theory of leadership argues that only individuals with innate characters could be appointed and promoted to leadership positions. Any individual who do not show leadership qualities is regarded as incapable of a leadership position. The characteristics perceived to be signs of leadership qualities were, for example, emotional intelligence, charismatic, dominance and conservatism (Knott-Craig, 2007). On the contrary, literature evidence points to the fact that no universal traits for leadership could be established and thus no specific traits could be agreed on as fundamental to leadership (Tng, 2009). Furthermore, what makes the organisation work effectively is not only the leader, but the abilities of workers, creativeness, shared purpose and coordination of activities within the organisation (Hartley, 2007). This study rejects a partial composition of leadership as being exclusively innate or exclusively socially acquired, and argues that leadership is a blended whole unit of different factors which can be both innate and socially acquired. Literature evidence submits that leadership is “fluid and emergent rather than a fixed phenomenon” (Gronn, 2000, p. 324). On the basis of this argument, leadership is penetrable and any learner at any level at school can become a leader in absence of any traits, as leadership comes with time, experience and exposure.

## **4. Summary**

The study attempted to establish the defining qualities of learner leadership in schools. Different views were advanced in respect of what learner leadership is and its characterisations. The difference in the understanding of learner leadership could be caused by the fact that learner leadership is a new concept and is still an under researched area, especially in the Namibian academic and leadership literature (Shekupakela-Nelulu, 2008). Notwithstanding the differences, the literature study and empirical investigation of this study yielded rich data whose analysis culminated into four major themes as the ultimate basis for learner leadership. Firstly, learner leadership is about having certain abilities to influence, innovate and motivate other learners, a finding which coincides with the meaning of leadership as influence, as per the definitions of authors such as Christie (2010) and Gillies (2013). Learner leaders should have established human resource capabilities to provide direction to other learners.

Secondly, leadership is about being a role model and setting good examples to followers. A leader keeps ahead of others and thus set an example of the way forward that others should follow. Thirdly, leadership is about having power to influence adherence to school rules, a quality that is closely related to policing as a traditional view of leadership. A learner leader should be able to exercise power to get the best results out of other learners. Fourthly, leadership is characterised by innate qualities which learners expose and makes them get elected to leadership positions. Although leadership from an innate perspective is supported by traditional theories of leadership, the perspective is refuted by contemporary views of leadership which view leadership as a shared process (Grant, 2008) that is distributed throughout the organisation (Gronn, 2000). This study rejects a partial composition of leadership as being exclusively innate or exclusively socially acquired, and argues that leadership is characterised by a combination of factors which can be both innate and socially acquired. This study contributes to existing knowledge pool on what constitute good leadership, especially in the context of learner leadership as an emerging leadership area.

The study established a framework of the required human resource capabilities for learner leadership so that individuals who are electing potential learner leaders have a leadership framework with which to benchmark their elections. In addition, learners who will be elected to learner leadership positions have a leadership framework, detailing the terms of reference of how they are expected to perform their leadership duties. Without an established learner leadership framework, the election of learners into the Learner



Representative Council would be carried out without an informed guidance and pragmatic benchmarks, and the elected learner leaders would have no empirical basis of what is required of them. Hence, this study is significant as it adds a multiplicity of new empirical meanings to existing election protocols and job descriptions of learner leaders in schools.

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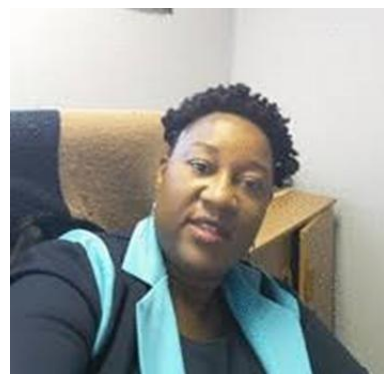
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