Tokenism and barriers to genuine learner participation in school governance in one progressive South African girls' high school

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Borrowing the participation level typology from civic participation literature, in the study reported on here, we explored the level of learner participation in school governance in 1 girls' high school in South Africa. We demonstrate that despite the schools' self-claimed progressive stance, its learner participation still exhibits numerous nuanced examples of tokenism. Using a qualitative research design and purposive sampling, we collected data from interviews and observation to examine the possible causes for, as well as consequences of this tokenism. The findings indicate that adults' beliefs about minors' limited capacity remain a structural barrier to learners' genuine participation. This belief threatens the credibility and legitimacy of the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) and this threat to legitimacy, in turn, reinforces the structural beliefs that adults hold and thus perpetuates a cycle whereby genuine participation is compromised and token participation is entrenched. We conclude this article with recommendations to address, mitigate and transcend token participation.

Keywords: learner participation; legitimacy; representative council of learners; school governance; school governing body; token participation

Introduction

The importance of youth participation in settings in which their lives are impacted daily is increasingly recognised (Phaswana, 2010). However, despite public institutions worldwide responding to increased activism calling for greater public involvement in the decisions of public institutions, the meaning, nature and practice of participation often remains unclear (Cornwall, 2008). While many countries have legislation and thus rhetoric acceptance, few overt discussions have happened around the nature of the power relations in the potentially democratic institutions (Gaventa, 2006). Carr (2005) explains that the 1980s globally saw a growing demand for decentralisation and greater autonomy in public schools across Europe, North America, Australasia and Africa, many involving the devolution of school governing bodies with the representation of relevant stakeholders. By 2005, all signatories to the United Nations (UN) Convention on the Rights of the Child had made progress with statutory provisions for increased learner participation in matters of school governance, but each country was facing unique challenges with implementation due to historical structures, ideologies and inequalities (Carr, 2005).

South Africa is no exception. School governance in South Africa before 1994 was autocratic where stakeholders, particularly the learners, were routinely excluded from participating in decision-making (Mncube, 2008). The 1970s and 1980s saw the birth of many organisations and movements fighting for the democratisation of school governance (Diseko, 1992; Matona, 1992). Learner-parent-teacher alliances such as the Soweto Parents Crisis Committee (1985) and the National Education Crisis Committee (1985) helped amplify the Congress of South African Students' (COSAS) cry for democratically elected RCLs (Kruss, 1988). Civic mobilisation of this nature paved way for the South African Schools Act (SASA) 84 of 1996, which aims to rectify the authoritarian structures of the apartheid school governance (Republic of South Africa [RSA], 1996a). SASA mandates all stakeholders in a secondary school community – principal, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and learners – to be represented in decision-making at the highest level of school governance: School Governing Bodies (SGBs). SGBs' mandates include creating and evaluating policies on admissions, language and the code of conduct, making recommendations on teaching and non-teaching staff appointments, managing school finance, determining school fees, and fundraising (Naidoo, 2005).

Learner participation in SGBs is through members of the RCLs. Learner participation and representation are believed to enhance the diversity of perspectives and increase the quality of discussions and decision-making (Nthontho, 2017; RSA, 1996a). Harber (2009, cited in Mncube, 2012:135) argues that democratic values and behaviour are best fostered through "the nature, structures and process of the education experienced." To foster social justice and the actualisation of South Africa's broader democracy, this argument suggests that democratic participation should start from a young age, at decentralised school level, and should involve all matters of school governance (Mncube, 2008). In other words, learners' participation in SGBs provides an opportunity to practice and cultivate democratic values among these future leaders.

Despite these intentions, however, Mathebula (2013) notes that many SGBs still show a tendency towards elitist, top-down and authoritarian governance. Although many schools have implemented an RCL and the RCL

is often represented in the SGBs (Carr & Williams, 2009), participation often remains superficial (Mncube, 2008). Among the three phases of learner participation Cockburn (2006) outlines – opportunity, attendance and engagement – Mncube (2012) observes that often only the first two are in place. A common "theory of governance in most schools is that if formal procedures are followed, and if stakeholders are on the SGB and its sub-committees, then they are involved in democratic decision-making and governance" (Naidoo, 2005:15). In practice, many learner representatives are "used as a form of 'window dressing' for SGB approval by government … as a kind of tokenism" (Mabovula, 2009:220) and are often excluded or silenced in decision-making processes.

Although seldom specifically invoked except be Mabovula (2009), the empirical observations pointed out by the various scholars above point to token participation proposed by Arnstein (1969). With an expectation that further exploring token participation will assist with understanding and mitigate against the mind-set that equates election with representation and representation with genuine participation, with this article we examine token participation explicitly. We base the analysis on the participation level typology from civic participation literature which highlights tokenism as a critical stage between non-participation and genuine participation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). In particular, we explore how learner participation plays out in one progressive girls' high school in South Africa where two main obstacles inhibiting learner participation – conservative culture and gender – are expected to exert limited influence. We explore the extent to which token participation exists in this school, its possible causes and consequences. The findings indicate that this school still exhibits numerous nuanced examples of token participation. Adults' beliefs about minors' limited capacity remains a structural barrier to learners' genuine participation (Mncube, 2001, 2008, 2012). This is reinforced by inadequate consideration of practical matters (Carr & Williams 2009) including adult-learner ratio and inadequate training. These obstacles threaten the credibility and legitimacy of the RCL among the RCL members themselves, among their constituents and among other adult stakeholders. This legitimacy threat, a topic hardly featured in literature, in turn reinforces the structural beliefs that adults hold and thus perpetuates a cycle whereby genuine participation is compromised.

The article is arranged as follows: after outlining the participation ladders developed by Arnstein (1969) and Hart (1992), levels of learner participation in school governance in South Africa as well as underlying reasons are reviewed. Research methodology for this case study is explained next, before the findings from the case study are presented and analysed. The article concludes by providing practical recommendations to enact genuine learner participation in South African school governance.

Theoretical Framework
Participation levels: Typology and metaphor
The participation ladder developed by Arnstein (1969) in the late 1960s is the most well-known participation typology. In this typology, Arnstein differentiates and defines tokenism as the stage where the stakeholders are physically present and that their views are heard, but they "lack the power to ensure that their views will be heeded" (Arnstein, 1969:217). Building on this concept, Hart (1992) developed a children's participation ladder with two tiers where *tokenism* is considered as *non-participation*. In Hart (1992:9), tokenism similarly refers to when children are "given a voice, but in fact have little or no choice about the subject or the style of communicating it" or little or no opportunity to formulate their own opinions. Tokenism is seldom explicitly involved in literature examining learner participation in school governance in South Africa. However, many empirical findings (Carr & Williams, 2009; Mabovula, 2009; Mathebula, 2013; Mncube, 2008, 2012) point to the widespread existence of this without specifically labelled as such. By guiding both the theoretical and empirical exploration in this study through this notion, we demonstrate the importance and value of this notion in the phenomenon. We also highlight that tokenism (including consultation, informing, placation in Arnstein's conceptualisation) is not genuine participation (decision-making) and obstacles need to be addressed to achieve genuine participation.

Despite their differences, both ladders distinguish rituals of participation (merely involvement) from genuine participation where participants' contribution is valued and taken into consideration in decision-making (hooks, 1994). Genuine participation goes beyond the freedom to participate in the power to redefine the space (Cornwall, 2008). "Translating voice into influence requires more than simply effective ways of capturing what people want to say; it involves efforts 'from above' and 'from below' … political will to convert professed commitment to participation into tangible action. 'From below', strategies are needed to build and support collectivities that can continue to exert pressure for change" (Cornwall, 2008:278). Tokenism, in contrast, is often used as "a means of legitimating already-taken decisions, providing a thin veneer of participation to lend the process moral authority ... Rarely are there any guarantees that what is said will be responded to or taken into account" (Cornwall, 2008:270).

Literature Review
Levels of learner participation in school governance in South Africa

Learner participation, or more broadly, children's rights to participate in decision-making on matters that govern them, is endorsed in South Africa by domestic legislation like SASA (RSA, 1996a) and the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa of 1996 (RSA, 1996b), as well as international legislation such as the UN Charter for the Rights of the Child (United Nations International Children's Emergency Fund, 1989). However, the literature (Mathebula, 2001; Mncube, 2008; Nkwinti, 2001; Nongubo, 2004; Tikoko, Kiprop & Bomett, 2011) on learner participation in school governance records numerous incidents of teachers' or school management's dominance over learners on SGBs, sometimes to the extent of manipulation (Joorst, 2007). Overall, learner participation in school governance in South Africa seems to point to tokenism, although this notion is only explicitly expressed in Mabovula (2009).

Fataar (2008:22) observes that "the SGBs have become a prime site for principals to establish a platform for their authoritative performances" while learner representatives' role is sometimes reduced to merely channelling communication to the rest of the learner population (Phaswana, 2010) or to policing and reporting on the behaviour of fellow learners (Shushu, Jacobs & Teise, 2013). In Duma's (2015:185) survey of 136 principals, 87% of participants agreed that "learner leaders are not always consulted when learner issues are discussed", pointing to the existence of rituals of inclusion but not real consultation (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992; hooks, 1994). Learners might engage on "issues like sport and social activities … [but not] educational issues" (Mabovula, 2009:228), or those related to teachers or school finance (Phaswana, 2010; Shushu et al., 2013), or other "sensitive issues" (e.g. proposed expulsion of a learner who had stabbed another learner (Mncube, 2008:83)). One school principal in Mabovula's (2009:228) study specifically stated that it was "not good to invite learners in on issues like educator misbehaviour and educator conflicts as these might affect the dignity of the educator towards learners. Some issues should be confidential to the school management team and the parent body of the SGB."

Sometimes the reinforcement of the power differentiation is overt. In Mabovula's study (2009:227), placation (Arnstein, 1969) is visible where "those [learner representatives] who were elected were warned even before they started participating that they need not raise complaints but that their part was to conform to the rules and regulations stipulated by members of the school governing body." There are also examples when learners "tried to raise some points their input was not accepted" (Mabovula, 2009:228), indicating a lack of real decision-making power. But more often, the power differentiation is more subtle or self-imposed. For example, some learners in Mncube's (2008:83) study "found it difficult to regard themselves as fully legitimate members of the SGB and they still perceived themselves as 'guests' on the governing body." Learners in Mabovula's study (2009) were shy to talk in a meeting. Even though learners were not prevented from saying anything in SGB meetings, one of Mncube's (2012:140) interviewees said that "it becomes automatic that they [learner representatives] become silent in the midst of adults" or resolve to asking teachers to speak on behalf of them at SGB meetings. Learner's lack of decision-making power and "inclusion without consultation" indicate their entrenched token participation on SGBs.

Barriers to genuine learner participation

One of the most apparent power differentiating factors and obstacles to learner participation is that of the age difference. Age-based hierarchy and discrimination are deeply rooted in traditional and cultural beliefs. Young age, in the mind of many adults, is equivalent to immaturity or lack of rationality (Carr & Williams, 2009) and an inability to make sound decisions (Mncube, 2001). In some cultures, particularly those of a conservative nature and more prevalent in rural and township settings, it is considered disrespectful that children engage with adults (Mabovula, 2009; Mncube, 2012). In these cultures, adults are considered to be the know-it-all's and youngsters are passive vessels and receptors (Freire, 1970). Some adults in these cultures are "reluctant to enter into discussions with minors" (Mncube, 2008:83).

Ignorance of the purpose and role of learner participation and the negative view held by some adult SGB members further exacerbate the impact of this ageist mentality. Children are considered as having no positive contribution to make in the structure of governance (Phaswana, 2010) or worse even, assumed to be obstructionist. Some adult SGB stakeholders in Mabovula's study (2009:229) claimed that "learners were only looking for faults and they liked to criticise." In Duma's (2015) study, over 80% of the principals felt that learner leaders "interfered" with school administration. Some thought that RCLs "would be too lenient if decisions were to be taken about their peers" (Mncube, 2008:83).

In addition to age, Naidoo's (2005:14) study further suggests that "historical, structural and ideological contradictions in new school governance policies", including issues of trust, culture and power (Trowler, Trowler & Saunders, 2018), are obstacles to genuine learner participation. Many of these barriers can be traced to South Africa's history. For example, the same

conservatism ingrained in much of the South African society also insists on authority, hierarchy, obedience and autocratic leadership (Carr & Williams, 2009; Mncube, 2008). The tendency for Black, Indian and Coloured learners to experience more discomfort and hesitancy in engaging freely with White adults (Mncube, 2012) is part of the disturbing apartheid legacy too. Gender stereotypes from strong patriarchal traditions in Africa contribute to "females … tend to leave most decisions to male members in the hope that they will make sound decisions ... tended to be less vocal than male learner governors and relinquished decision-making activities to male learner governors" (Mncube, 2008:84). Phaswana (2010:107) similarly reports that girls are more likely to renounce their leadership positions to a male candidate in the RCL because "males are seen to be more impactful."

Other socio-economic barriers also exist, for example learners whose parents have not paid full school fees might feel ashamed, particularly during SGB discussions on fees, budgets and raising funds (Mncube, 2012). Additional barriers arise from administrative matters, for example, the language of communication during the SGB meetings or whether everyone was given equal access to information (e.g. the agenda and emails that circulate between SGB meetings (Carr & Williams, 2009)).

The lack of legitimacy both perceived and experienced by RCLs further contributes to barriers of effective participation. A lack of legitimacy is visible when their constituencies note RCLs' limited power to affect decisions, to co-create content and process, to exert participation and to delegate tasks and responsibilities (Bartley, Dimenäs & Hallnäs, 2010).

Method
In this article we report on a single case study of one progressive girls' high school because the two main obstacles outlined in literature – conservative culture and gender – are expected to exert limited influence in this context. We adopted a qualitative approach to explore how participants articulated their experience and perspective on learner participation on the SGB in their school. As the interest in this study was to explore participants' experience, perception, and understanding of their lived phenomenon, a qualitative approach (Straus & Corbin, 1998) was deemed suitable. Purposeful sampling, "a process of picking up participants based on their knowledge and experience" (Merriam, 1998:61), was used to target specific types of participants including parents and RCL representatives who served on the SGB, as well as the principal. Semi-structured interviews to "see the world through the eyes of the participants and the interviews can be a valuable source of

information if used correctly" (Nieuwenhuis, 2016:22) were conducted. In addition, observations were also used to be familiar with the setting and the context (Creswell, 2009) and also to see what people actually did. One of the authors attended every SGB meeting held in 2018 and 2019 (roughly eight meetings per year). Data were analysed through inductive coding which allows codes to emerge from the data (Creswell, 2009) and content analysis (Hsieh & Shannon, 2015) through word repetition, keywords in context, and compare and contrast. Words that repeatedly appeared in the transcripts were looked at; so were concepts in relation to their context as well as similarities and differences among different categories of participants. Ethical clearance from the Faculty was obtained. So were permission from the Gauteng Department of Education and that of the principal before the participants were approached with informed consent.

The relevant school was a former Model C school situated in an affluent suburb and offers English as the medium of instruction. The school has approximately 1,200 learners of which 20% do not pay any school fees and less than 50% pay full school fees. It is a single-sex school. Both the neighbourhood and the school are racially mixed. The staff body, however, remains predominantly White, with an all-White female school management team. The school self-identifies as progressive in terms of straddling a traditional and contemporary approach to education, discipline and traditions. The school promotes values such as courage and confidence.

This school does not maintain an old prefect system but has merged the two systems by expanding the Grade 12 RCL to approximately 15 members while the representation of Grades 8 to 11 in the RCL is three members per grade. RCL members are elected annually into portfolios including, but not limited to, discipline, leadership and service. Three Grade 12 RCL members are represented on the SGB. This school decides that one of these three is always the head girl and the other two positions are filled via nominations and voting within the RCL. A teacher liaison officer (TLO) is appointed by the principal to oversee the RCL and to be a liaison between the Department of Education and the RCL in terms of training or updated roles. The principal also directly engages with the RCL representatives at weekly meetings to discuss learner grievances, resolutions for these grievances and upcoming events. The SGB comprises three executive positions (chairperson, vice chairperson and secretary) and the principal with the rest of the adult members dividing themselves in sub-committees including but not limited to finance, appointments, discipline and fundraising. None of the RCL representatives is members of any of the SGB sub-committees.

The sample in this study included all three Grade 12 RCL SGB representatives, two parents and the principal. Their biographic details are presented in Table 1.

Table 1 Participant distribution

Participants	Race	Gender	Other SGB role
Learner A	White	Female	
Learner B	Indian	Female	
Learner C	Black	Female	
Parent D	Black	Female	SGB Secretary
Parent E	Indian Muslim	Male	Member of the SGB's discipline subcommittee
Principal	White	Female	

Results

Tokenism or Genuine Participation?

Parent D was proud to belong to a country where progressive policy such as the SASA existed. However, when asked what she expected from the RCL representatives on the SGB, the principal stated that the main purpose was to relay to the learner body the complex nature of what the school management was trying to deal with. Similar to Phaswana's (2010) and Shushu et al.'s (2013) finding, this principal expressed her hope that the learner body would have more sympathy with management's decision-making and moderate their demands, especially regarding finances and resources with RCLs reporting back to the learner body. Similar to other findings where adults continued to believe that minors had limited capabilities (Carr & Williams, 2009; Freire, 1970; Mncube, 2001, 2008; Phaswana, 2010), the principal similarly stated that learners did not have the expertise to contribute to policy creation – one of the SGB's main functions. This indicates a low expectation by adults, wherein RCL representatives were not expected to do more than relay resolutions to their constituents.

The learner representatives largely remained listeners while adult representatives were speakers in SGB meetings. While none of the learners reported explicit discrimination from the adult members of the SGB with regard to their participation, a lack of content knowledge, language barriers, unfavourable adult-learner ratios and a lack of confidence in raising issues coupled with inadequate training perpetuated the compromised learner participation.

In this school, the RCL's voices on SGB meetings were restricted to one slot on the agenda when they reported back on recent RCL activities or events. All RCL representatives confirmed that their single slot on the SGB agenda was the only slot in which they participated in the meeting. Learner C described her participation as "*literally coming to meetings just to report back*." Parent D agreed that RCL representatives were often "*muted*" outside of their slot. "*I feel that they seem a bit out of place sitting on this SGB … more to watch and observe what's happening*" (Parent E). This is better than "*just sitting there and not having anything to say*" (Learner C), but Learner A often found "[herself] *wanting to speak on various other issues that could increase* [her] *participation on the SGB*." Learner B similarly pointed to the lack of "*opportunity for us to bring up views and ideas that we feel should be spoken about in this type of forum*." In addition to reporting back, "*we haven't been allocated a slot for questions or to bring up something*" (Learner B).

Different committees report back on their activities and the length of the reporting varies in different SGB meetings, but the RCL slot tends to be the shortest. "*In a meeting that would last 2 hours, the RCL would speak for about 5 minutes*" (Parent E).

Outside the RCL slots, the three learner representatives hardly spoke at all, although all three felt that they could contribute more to discipline at the SGB because it was a significant part of their RCL duties. Learner C stated as follows: "*I probably contribute to discipline and discipline alone*." Learner A and B similarly mentioned this because they "*often witness a lot of disciplinary issues*" and "*I am able to add a perspective of why the discipline is the way it is, or what the issue is*." However, this experience and perspective did not translate to them influencing decision-making about school discipline because they were not part of the SGB discipline committee and therefore did not sit on disciplinary hearings. Parent E felt that, in his capacity as a member of the SGB's sub-committee on discipline, there was a gap where learner's inputs would be valuable: "*members of the RCL need to be* [present] *in the disciplinary hearings* [of other learners] *to give us a different perspective, from a student's point of view*."

Entrenched token participation is evident here, where the learner representatives were physically present and their views sometimes heard, but they did not participate in real decision-making (Arnstein, 1969; Hart, 1992). The learners did not have the power to redefine the space (Cornwall, 2008). This is similar to what was found in terms of a limited level of genuine participation in other studies (Duma, 2015; Mabovula, 2009; Mathebula, 2001; Mncube 2008; Phaswana, 2010; Nongubo, 2004; Shushu et al., 2013).

Structural Belief and Its Influence on Learners' Participation

Despite the SASA policy and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) guidelines that render learner stakeholders as equal juridical persons, the vision set for the RCL in the guidelines for RCLs in 1999 "gives minimal and conditional roles to members of the RCL" (Mabovula, 2009:220). This ambiguity, alongside structural beliefs about the (in)capabilities of children in governance, adult-children power dynamics and self-induced lack of confidence and legitimacy, externally reinforced a lack of confidence among the learner representatives.

Parent E felt that "*the students don't feel that they could really say what they want to, and it's just a human emotion that you're not going to really say something that might jeopardise your future.*" He alluded to the difficulty of equal and fearless engagement between adults and learners, especially when learners raised issues that might present a teacher or management unfavourably. He felt that the learners might contribute more "*without the fear of being victimised ... without the fear of the repercussions coming forward.*" hooks (1994) states that learners are often silent or silenced when they do not feel safe. This safety refers to both real safety, as well as perceived safety. School management intervention in the communication channels and procedures between the learner body, it's representatives and the SGB affected the safety and legitimacy of RCL representatives. Learner B mentioned that the principal was critical of them raising more than what they had been briefed on and agreed upon with the principal during their weekly meeting. Learner C agreed and recalled an incident where they raised a hair issue at an SGB meeting in which learners complained that only Black learners were being punished for hair policy infringements while their White peers' hair infringements went unpunished. The principal spoke to the RCL representatives after the SGB meeting and asked them not to raise issues on the SGB that she was not made aware of first.

Besides this instance of the principal's overt displeasure with learners' bringing up issues not pre-discussed, much of the learners' silence was also linked to learners experiencing a lack of confidence when engaging with the adults and a sense of intimidation linked to alienating formalities, age gaps, knowledge gaps, language barriers and an unfavourable adult-learner ratio. All three RCL representatives lacked confidence "*to bring up a topic*" (Learner B) and express their wishes for the RCL SGB representatives of the following year to "*speak your truth in the meetings ... Have confidence in bringing up issues*" (Learner B), "*to be confident in what they are saying, even if*

it feels like they are in a minority of the opinion" (Learner A). One source for this lack of confidence and a sense of intimidation was the formality of the meetings. Formality here refers to the execution of the procedures and tools used by the SGB, such as confidentiality, an agenda, minute-taking, line items, how to raise new issues, how to communicate, et cetera. Such procedures are mandated in SASA and the Department of Education RCL guidelines but are alien to the learners who are used to their own informal and comfortable RCL meetings where "*it's much easier to participate and talk and speak*" (Learner B). To counter the uncomfortable formality, Learner A suggests to

> allocate more time, or free time for just general conversation and general discourse ... when it's a general conversation we achieve the best conversations and the most relevant or the most pressing issues that wouldn't have otherwise surfaced without the conversation.

Learner B highlighted a perceived knowledge gap where "*having a room full of adults speaking about stuff that they usually would speak about and do know a lot about ... I don't feel as comfortable talking.*" Learner C stressed the age difference: "*It's intimidating having so many old people around me and usually there's this perception that the young aren't as wise as the old and so I might be talking and they probably think 'ag, it's this kid speaking....' They did emphasise that my opinion does matter but it just feels like it doesn't because like, being like, the youngest there, it's just intimidating.*" Learner B also attributed her intimidation to the issue of language:

> Adults in general speak better English than children. So this also made me feel a little bit self-conscious ... it caused me to rethink what I do say and what I don't stay in front of such astute and educated teachers and [the principal] *and* [the chairman].

Another source of intimidation was due to the adult-learner ratio. At any given SGB meeting approximately 22 people were present of which seven were staff (three voting staff members, one voting principal and three non-voting management staff), two support staff (one voting, one non-voting), 10 parents (nine voting and one non-voting), three learners (all non-voting). Adult representatives made up 19 of the 22 members in the SGB with the learner representatives comprising of three. Learner A felt "*less comfortable in giving more of my opinions ... because I think that we are in the minority of the numbers.*" This was confirmed by Learner C who, when asked what she would change about SGB if she were the chairperson, stated that she would "*add more students onto this SGB ... like it should be equal.*" This imbalanced age ratio was replicated within the RCL itself, with more than half of its

members being Grade 12 learners.

The National Child Participation Framework (Save the Children South Africa, 2018:18) argues that children's genuine participation is challenged by an absence of "formal systemic political participatory spaces and processes" and a lack of preparation and support for adults attempting to facilitate children's genuine participation. Although both parent participants expressed a greater desire for genuine learner participation and were also more attuned to the intimidation experienced by learners on the SGB, Parent D stated that "*these kids are feisty enough. They have sufficient confidence. It doesn't matter how many adults you put in there … [the learners] have minds of their own and they're very vocal. They are not shy to speak their minds.*" This, however, contradicts with what the three learner representatives themselves felt: they repeatedly stated that "*It is extremely intimidating as a learner coming forward to a forum of adults*" (Learner B).

Another barrier was inadequate training for learner governors. The Department of Education runs training for RCLs every year, as well as more frequent training for TLOs who are expected to relay their training to the RCLs. Upon inquiring about what training was offered to the RCL and RCL SGB representatives at the school, the principal said that the Department's RCL training did take place, but that they often received notice of it too late and that it was "*below the standards of the training we offer our RCL.*" This refers to the school's own RCL induction where the learners reviewed the code of conduct and discussed what learner leadership meant to them as individuals and as a collective. The content of the training was limited to "leadership" and did not adequately equip the RCL on their mandate as equal stakeholders, their rights, roles and responsibilities on an SGB and on the categories-of-school-governance content as mandated in SASA. The SGB RCLs received no training separately from the RCL body.

Discussion
Token Participation and Legitimacy: A Vicious Reinforcing Loop
Although none of the adults in the study directly expressed their displeasure of children engaging with adults like some adults in other studies did (Mabovula, 2009; Mncube, 2012), the RCL representatives themselves reported experiencing a legitimacy crisis, reinforced by their lack of meaningful engagement and contribution in the SGB. The lack of RCL training on their mandate, role and responsibility on the SGB, and the school management's tampering with RCL structures and RCL processes and communication between the learner body and the SGB, limited their ability to engage effectively at SGB meetings. A lack of effective engagement, in turn, further inhibited

legitimacy among their constituents. Parents were aware of this. Parent D raised concerns from her perspective as a parent: "*right now there is no confidence in the system*" and explains hearing about "*subtle and simmering*" tensions in the school such as racism, bad attitudes among learners and staff and favouritism from her daughter at home, yet these issues were never discussed in the RCL slot at SGB meetings.

School management who tamper with the Education Department's guidelines of the democratic structure of RCLs contribute to legitimacy challenges among learners. An overrepresentation of Grade 12 learners in the RCL indicates a structural belief that links older ages with superior representation and decision-making capacity, which threatens the effective representation of lower grades. The RCL themselves were aware of this too and expressed their desire to represent better, through for example, increasing the number of RCLs or non-RCLs learners on the SGB. Learner B further suggested that the RCL slot on the SGB agenda "*be renamed 'student report back' because this RCL name sort of limits our scope.*"

The learner representatives were also troubled by the limited scope of issues that they could present. Parent D similarly described a communication incident when she encouraged her daughter to approach the RCL, but her daughter "[didn't] *want to get her* [head girl] *in trouble.*" Similarly, in a weekly meeting between the RCL and principal, RCLs were advised against raising "day-to-day" issues at the SGB, suggesting that some issues were regarded as being outside the scope of the RCL's decision-making and that sometimes adults interpreted learners' voices as that of trouble makers (Bessong, Mashau & Mulaudzi, 2016). Learner A raised concerns about the methods used by the RCL to understand and communicate with the wider learner body as there was a history of certain individuals on the RCL who refused to take up certain issues. Parent D described her daughter's struggle when she raised her concerns with RCL members and didn't receive feedback from the RCL or SGB. The issues of a limited scope and ineffective or "captured" channels of communication exacerbated the legitimacy crisis for RCLs and further entrenched their token participation in matters of school governance. This also reinforced the unchallenged "from above" adult perceptions of learners as incapable governors.

Conclusion
Like the youth in other parts of Africa, who form the majority of the population and have historically been at the centre of societal interactions and transformations, our study shows that the youth are still easily relegated to the margins of political and

socio-economic decision-making processes (De Boeck & Honwana, 2005). The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa, 1996, commits to a democracy that is both representative and participatory where participation "does not extend simply to the right to elect representatives but translates into the right to influence decisions" (Naidoo, 2005:13). What this case study demonstrates is that genuine learner participation remains hard to achieve. In this progressive, single-gendered school, the learner representatives clearly attended SGB meetings and were given a voice, yet tokenism appears to be entrenched, manifesting in beliefs held by adults about learner incapability and resultant actions which hamper the legitimate and effective participation of learners on SGBs. Although, like learner representatives in other studies, they did not regard themselves as "guests" (Mncube, 2008:83), and were not prevented from saying anything in SGB meetings (Mncube, 2012), with no indication of intimidation due to race or gender, the learner representatives still felt an overwhelming sense of intimidation and were automatically quiet outside of their own report-back slot. Furthermore, they had very little choice about the subjects that they could raise in SGB meetings (Hart, 1992) and their voice was restricted to their slot on the agenda and they lacked any real decision-making power via the SGB sub-committees.

Genuine participation does not happen automatically. It "needs to be nurtured. People need to feel able to express themselves without fear of reprisals or the expectation of not being listened to or taken seriously" (Cornwall, 2008:278). Besides a hint of fear when the learner representatives mention the principal's displeasure of them bringing out some issues that were not pre-approved, the main source of the discomfort and intimidation still mainly stemmed from the deep-set adult-child power relations and perpetrated by practical matters such as alienating formalities, language ability and unfavourable adult-learner ratio – a topic hardly discussed in learner participation literature in South Africa. Enabling factors are much needed to mitigate the confidence that learners lack due to age, experience, fear of consequences, knowledge of governance issues and limiting traditional views that adults hold about the role of children in society. Inadequate training further exacerbates the inadequate knowledge and skills that these learner representatives need, and this, in turn, reinforces the lack of confidence, meaningful engagement and perceived legitimacy among their constituents. Bessong et al., (2016) further suggest that the inclusion of learners on the SGB must incorporate deliberation through a revamp of the structure of the meeting and time allocated to discussing learner issues. The parent participants in our study echoed this and suggested

that the meeting started with learner issues. The learner representatives should also be included in SGB subcommittees and more learners should be invited to join SGB meetings as non-voting members, as this has already been implemented in the case of one parent and three teacher representatives. This would shift the unfavourable child-adult ratio in the room in an attempt to decrease learner intimidation.

Awareness, confidence and coordination "from below" (Cornwall, 2008) is critical. Learner representatives will need to mitigate legitimacy barriers by improving their engagement with their constituents, restoring faith in the RCL as a representative body and developing the confidence to engage, deliberate and make decisions at the SGB level based on this mandate. Here learners must also seek knowledge of their rights, responsibilities, and options (Arnstein, 1969) as RCL members.

This was a single case study conducted at one secondary school. This small scale limited the generalisability of the findings of this study to other contexts. However, this case study sheds light on some of the historical structures, ideologies and inequalities experienced in the implementation of decentralised school governance in South Africa. It is our hope that other countries that undergo the same process may also learn from the challenges and recommendations raised in this study. The adults in this study were not ignorant. They fully recognised the potential of learner participation. However, their inadequate recognition of the sources of the intimidation and downplaying of practical issues such as the adult-learner ratio sabotaged their hopes for greater learner participation. Leadership and support "from above" is more critical in learner participation because of existing power differentiation (Cornwall, 2008; Mncube & Harber, 2013). In this case, despite the principal's and the school's open embrace of progressive values, the management ethos remained bureaucratic and hierarchical. In light of this, we recommend that the school re-engages with the SASA's original mandate for the purpose, structure, duties and responsibilities of the RCL as well as the Department of Education's RCL guidelines.

Authors' Contributions
Both authors conceptualised, wrote and reviewed the final manuscript; CS conducted the interviews.

Notes
i.   We use the terms "participation" and "engagement" interchangeably in this article. We recognise that some traditions, for example Black, feminist traditions, and some scholars prefer the term "engagement" as a way to address the exclusion of marginalised voices more broadly (Carr & Williams, 2009; hooks, 1994), but participation is the phrase used in SASA and is also commonly used in civic participation literature.

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