

Revisiting Jürgen Habermas's notion of communicative action and its relevance for South African school governance: can it succeed?

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I apply as theoretical framework the Habermassian principles of 'communicative action' and 'consensus' through deliberation and reasoning. In particular, I focus on 'rational' and 'argumentative' communication through which school governance stakeholders could advance arguments and counter-arguments. I explore perceptions of educators concerning the role of learners, their experience and their democratic participation in school governance. I collected data using focus group discussions with educators in five selected schools in the Eastern Cape province of South Africa. Data were analysed using natural meaning units which represented specific thoughts, feelings or perceptions as expressed by the participants. Results showed that educators were not very eager to accept learners as participants in the structure of school governance. Finally, I suggest that, through the Habermassian notion of communicative action, school governing body stakeholders will be free to exchange ideas, and that they will not only voice opinions, but also listen, because through the act of engaging and listening (communicative action) participants can be persuaded and their thinking can be transformed.

Keywords: communicative action; Department of Education; governance framework; school governance

Introduction

Habermas, in his *Moral Consciousness and Communicative Action*, defines the concept of communicative action as follows:

Communicative action can be understood as a circular process in which the actor is two things in one: an initiator, who masters situations through actions for which he is accountable, and a product of the transitions surrounding him, of groups whose cohesion is based on solidarity to which he belongs, and of processes of socialisation in which he is reared (Habermas, 1981:135).

Communicative action in this sense is the one type of action that Habermas says uses all the human ways of thinking, and language. This combination will allow school governance stakeholders to understand and agree with one another and to make plans for common action. The act of coming together and agreeing (communicative action) takes the place of revolution as a mode of change.

This view is in line with the South African School Governance Framework (RSA, 2004) which calls not only for dialogue, but for space for safe and free expression. In this structure of school governance among basic liberties contained in the framework is the right of freedom of speech, freedom of association, and freedom of the person. Building consensus and understanding

difference through dialogue is at the heart of nurturing a culture of communication and participation among all school governance stakeholders (Eastern Cape Department of Education, 2001).

Furthermore, social justice and equity are highlighted in the governance framework, while the South African Constitution grants inalienable rights to equality, freedom of expression and choice, which are in line with the inclusion of values in education. The country, according to the department of education (DoE), has come up with a model that it can call its own, “a model that has come to be known by its people” (RSA, 2004). In schools this means opening channels of dialogue between all stakeholders.

In addition to the framework, the South African Schools Act stipulates that “[a] school governance structure should involve all stakeholder groups in active and responsible roles, encourage tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision making” (DoE, 1996:16). However, while the rewards have been great, there are still many challenges which need to be faced in the area of school governance (DoE, 2004:vii), such as a lack of communication, rational thinking, inclusive democratic participation, freedom of speech, equality and individual rights.

Findings from the Ministerial Review Committee Report (DoE, 2004:vii) revealed particular difficulties facing school governors. These were difficult relationships between a largely educated corps on the school governing structures and a largely under-educated parent community, conflicts between parents and educators around the meanings of governance and management, and the weakness of communication channels between SGBs and the provincial departments of education.

Moreover, the national department of education cautioned schools about the lack of common understanding of SGB members. It warned that if the lack of understanding continued to prevail among SGB representatives, governance processes would grind to a halt (RSA, 2004:83). These problems highlight the fact that something needs to be done as a matter of urgency. In this paper, I seek to establish whether what has been revealed by DoE is still being experienced by SGB stakeholders, but focusing on rapport between Educators and Representative Council of Learners. My aim is to unveil the perception of educators concerning the role of learners, their experience and their democratic participation in school governance, guided by the following objectives:

- To describe Habermas’s theory of Communicative Action;
- to give summary implications and theory linkages for the five participating schools; and
- to discuss the relevance of Habermas’s theory to South African school governance.

I now move on to Jürgen Habermas’s theoretical perspective.

Jürgen Habermas and communicative action

Jürgen Habermas (1996), a German thinker and philosopher, put forward his ideas of ‘communicative action’ and ‘consensus through deliberation and rea-

soning', which have been adapted to form a basis for argument for this article. In his theory of communicative action, Habermas introduces the concept of 'crisis'. According to Habermas, crisis comes when modern society fails to meet individual needs and when institutions in society manipulate individuals. He explains that people interact to respond to this crisis and he calls this interaction "communicative action".

Rational communication

Habermas (1996) asserts that rationality must be dialogical or 'communicative', through which participants advance arguments and counterarguments. His defence of communicative reason is forthright when he argues that communicative rationality is the consensus-bringing force of argumentative speech. He asserts that only the force of the better argument reaches consensual decisions, so that, at the end of deliberative process, all concerned are convinced by the decisions reached and accept them as reasonable.

Habermas is given support by Johnson, Pete and Du Plessis (2001:235), who posit that he (Habermas) views language as a means of rational communication. His theory of communicative action is concerned with how language is used to achieve mutual understanding through speech acts, that is, acts of linguistic communication in which the speaker performs an action. Habermas's view is that participants can only arrive at the truth when language facilitates mutual understanding via effective communicative action.

Habermas (1976:49) argues that truthfulness arises "in regard to the general pragmatic functions of the establishment of interpersonal relations, on the one hand, and the representation of facts, on the other". In other words, truth can arise when both interpersonal relations are established and agreed facts are represented. His faith in the possibility of truthfulness via communicative action underlies his model of rational deliberation and democratic procedure. According to Habermas, without public discussions in which mutual understanding of key issues and needs is achieved, the democratic process, and by extension the legitimacy of the political system, will fail.

This approach places effective communication at the basis of political democracy. Habermas describes the "public sphere" as a discursive space in which citizens participate and act through dialogue and debate. In his discursive aspects of the public sphere, he argues for a procedural model of democracy, and believes that in order to encourage public participation and broaden or strengthen democracy; politics must be viewed as a public conversation governed by legitimating procedures and reason.

Habermas's ideas are supported by Roederer and Moelendorf (2004:430), who also maintain that for democratic participation to be a success, rationality is vital in order to set up a procedural model of politics (or a theory of discourse ethics or communicative action). Habermas argues that democratic deliberation embodies communicative reason. He argues that whereas strategic action co-ordinates social interaction by external influence or force, communicative reason does so via 'consent', which involves arriving at an agree-

ment that is justifiable solely in the light of generalisable interests of the relevant parties by means of argumentative communication (Habermas, 1976).

Argumentative communication

According to Habermas, participation invariably needs to result in consensus. He argues that consensus ought to be subjected to argumentative communication or deliberation and reflection. In other words, he believes that consensus should not be a prerequisite for discussion, but should rather reflect the democratic discourse of informed deliberation and reflection responsive to the demands of an active citizenry (Habermas, 1996:299). He argues that the rights of people to participate in deliberation are legally institutionalised without any individual being excluded (Habermas, 1996:147).

For him the success of communicative action depends not on a collectively acting citizenry, but on the institutionalisation of the corresponding procedures and conditions of communication that would allow citizens to deliberate in informal public spheres. Habermas believes that each individual has “an equal opportunity to be heard” in the deliberative process. In his idea of deliberation, Habermas is supported by Elster (1998) who believes that ‘deliberation’ refers either to a particular sort of discussion — one that involves the careful and serious weighing of reasons for and against some proposition — or to an inferior process by which an individual weighs reasons for and against courses of action (Elster, 1998:63).

Elster (1998:63) also asserts that theorists such as Habermas, who are interested in deliberative democracy, are interested in promoting public deliberation — a particular sort of discussion — rather than just private or ‘interior’ deliberation. To explain this, Habermas recognises that a discourse-theoretic interpretation insists on the fact that democratic will-formation draws its legitimating force both from the communicative pre-suppositions that allow the better arguments to come into play in various forms of deliberations and from the procedures that secure fair bargaining processes (Habermas, 1996:24).

Cohen (1989:33) supports Habermas’s theory by maintaining that deliberation aims to arrive at a rationally motivated consensus to find reasons that are persuasive to all. Cohen asserts that deliberation may lead to a decision that is reasoned, and may also inform the reasons why the decisions are made or are not made. Furthermore, these reasons may guide the implementation of the decision and the actions of the government. For Habermas, the positives of modernity, namely, the recognition of human rights and the enactment of general norms, are expressions of reason (rationality) (Johnson *et al.*, 2001:235). This means that a deliberative conception of democracy puts public reasoning at the centre of political justification. This conception of justification through public reasoning can be represented in an idealised procedure of political deliberation, constructed to capture the notions of freedom, equality, and reasoning that figure in the communicative ideal.

Research design

Interpretive paradigm: Narrative inquiry

An interpretive approach using narrative inquiry was employed in this article. Interpretivism is based upon general characteristics such as understanding and interpretation of daily occurrences and social structures as well as the meanings people give to the phenomena. Besides, a narrative inquiry is an interpretive, qualitative method of research. It intends to inform practice as well as to clarify criteria that are appropriate for assessing the merit of the narrative research approach based upon the interpretive model.

Five schools were selected and educators were interviewed using focus group discussions in each school. Focus groups are generally regarded as a useful way of exploring attitudes on sensitive issues, or controversial topics. Mwanje (2001:26) posits that focus group discussions (FGDs) capitalise on group dynamics, and allow a small group of respondents into increasing levels of focus and depth on the key issues of the research topic. The research interview was open-ended and conducted in an informal, non-directive manner so as to allow conversation to flow.

Data analysis

I analysed the data using the natural meaning units (NMUs), which were loosely structured with the intention that the structures give order and flow to what might otherwise have been jumbled-up statements. These are the central themes, which form the basis for general and situated descriptions of the respondents' experience of the phenomenon. These NMUs are naturally occurring units that "represent specific thoughts, feelings, or perceptions, as expressed by the participant" (Heath, 2000:55).

The following five texts depict the conditions of the life world of learners in the structure of school governance, through the eyes of educators in five carefully selected schools in the Mthatha region of the Eastern Cape province. The aim was to unveil the perception of educators concerning the role of learners, their experience and their democratic participation in school governance in their respective schools.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School A

It appeared that democratic participation by educators in the school was not taken seriously, for example, they did not hide the fact that they were not keen about learners taking decisions with parents and themselves. They felt that when crucial decisions were to be taken, they did not need input from the learners: "*They do not always attend meetings because parents and some adults believe that the SGB committee is only meant for adults. Sometimes learners are not even invited to meetings when their input and participation is not needed*".

Freedom of speech was compromised by not allowing learners to elect their own representatives. For example, the educators believed that learners should not be given an opportunity to elect themselves but instead should be elected by educators and the school management team: "*Learners, who are to*

be elected to be members of the SGB, are elected by educators and one member of the school management team (SMT) in our school”.

Educators felt that learners were not given equal access to information as they were inexperienced and did not know what was expected of them: *“No, learners are not given equal access to information like other stakeholders. They are inexperienced and they do not know what is expected of them”*. Educators felt that parents monopolised the SGB structure as belonging to adults and saw it as no place for children. They felt that learners should be left out of the SGB meetings because they were not intellectually and emotionally ready to carry the burden of school governance. As a result learners were excluded on the basis of age.

Learners’ rights were compromised at the school as educators felt that learners’ input and participation was not needed as such. Educators put the blame on parents as they felt that it was they (parents) who saw learners as having too many rights: *“Parents believe that children have too many rights, which are the cause of disciplinary problems in the school, but educators and the principal regard it as their duty to bring learners on board”*. They blamed learners’ rights as the cause of ill discipline among learners. They believed that too many rights on the part of learners hindered school progress and good governance.

Learners excluded themselves, according to educators, and cited reasons such as the length of time the meetings took as a possible reason for absenteeism among learners: *“We are not very keen about learners taking decisions with parents and teachers”*. Educators also felt that no attempt was being made to empower learners: *“There is no development and growth that I can say I notice is taking place to those learners who are part of SGB”*.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School B

In School B, educators’ responses revealed that minimal democratic participation was involved in the structure of school governance: *“Learners are allowed to take the kind of decisions that benefit them”*. They gave their learners equal access to information — just like other stakeholders — but at the same time they agreed that learners did not attend all meetings except those that directly affected them. In my view, the inclusion of learners is of paramount importance, and if this is not done it follows that no participation can be achieved: *“Learners do not attend all meetings; they attend those meetings that will only benefit them”*.

The involvement of learners was minimal. Educators were more comfortable with learners being present in the SGB meetings if there were no crucial issues, such as teacher confrontation, to be discussed on that particular day. They felt that learners were allowed to take the kind of decisions that benefited them (the learners). They did not experience any problems or misunderstandings as decisions were taken through consultation: *“Learners are only involved when decisions involve learner issues and not parent and teacher issues. When decisions are crucial for example, learners are not allow-*

ed to attend and usually they are not involved". Learners were deliberately excluded from some meetings as educators felt that they did not need learners when matters affecting educators and parents were being discussed. They maintained that when decisions were crucial, learners should not attend.

Educators felt that learners were given their chance to deliberate and argue especially if what they said was constructive and would benefit all learners in the school as a whole: "*Learners are allowed to oppose decisions but if they do they must come up with a solution*". They also felt that learners who were part of school governance were benefiting as they continued to develop and grow.

Educators put the blame on departmental officials for problems in school governance. This shows without any doubt that learners were not fully welcome in the structure of governance: "*The Department of Education officials need to intervene and speak out to parents, teachers and learners about the importance of working together at all times*".

Summary implications and theory linkages for School C

Freedom of speech was limited in School C. Educators felt that learners should not elect each other as that duty should be left for educators to perform: "*In this school learners do not elect one another, it is the duty of educators to elect them*". They maintained that they did not have any kind of criteria to use when choosing learners. For democratic participation to take place learners were expected to choose their own representatives and not be guided by educators.

The exclusion of learners was obvious at this school: "*To tell you an honest truth, learners are not given a chance to exercise democracy, as they are not even always being informed of all the meetings*". Educators felt that learners were not given a chance to exercise their democratic rights in school governance: "*There are no frequent meetings of school governance, they only happen from time to time. But, when it comes to learners, they attend meetings when there is an issue or a need that involves them*".

The educators accepted that learners did not perform a meaningful role in school governance as they were not given enough chance to do so: "*Learners are not always present when meetings are conducted because sometimes SGB meetings are held during school hours and those educators who are not members of school governance will be teaching at the time*".

The educators also accepted the fact that there were not frequent SGB meetings, but maintained that learners attended the meetings when there was an issue pertaining to them: "*We all agree that we do not need children when crucial decisions are to be taken*". They acknowledged the fact that learners were not always present during SGB meetings, as sometimes meetings were held during school hours when those educators who were not part of school governance were busy teaching.

It was clear that the educators took decisions without the learners' participation: "*Learners when it comes to arguments and discussions, they just became passive, as they do not want to share their ideas in the presence of*

adults". Educators felt that there was no exchange of ideas among members. They had problems with learners as the learners did not want to argue, but just came and sat quietly — they were passive instead of being active participants.

The educators were not sure whether there were any signs of development in those learners who were part of the SGB, but they were confident of their gaining valuable skills such as leadership and communication: *"I can't say there is development because they do not even attend all meetings. But, I can say they gain valuable skills such as leadership and communication"*.

Lastly, the educators felt that learners were not given any kind of training: *"There is no kind of training that learners are expected to undergo"*.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School D

There was no equality of opportunity afforded to learners in this school and no freedom of speech: *"The learners from Grade 8 upwards elect one another, and the teacher liaison officer guides learners during election. The liaison officer does that in order to build a trusting relationship with the representative council of learners"*. Educators maintained that learners elected one another in the presence of the teacher liaison officer (TLO). In my view, the principles of democracy were compromised in this school.

There was no fair representation among stakeholders: *"In our school governance, we have five parents, two educators and one learner who form part of the SGB team in this school. They have a duty to create mutual respect, good manners and morality among learners"*. Their school governance was constituted as follows: five parents, two educators and one learner.

Educators felt that all stakeholders were given equal access because they all attended meetings convened for SGB purposes. When choosing the RCL members they needed learners whom they believed were critical thinkers, visionary and supportive: *"In our school, we need learners who are critical thinkers, visionary learners and supportive learners"*.

Cultural practices were also visible in the school governance practices. Educators believed that parents clung to the past, having been influenced by societal practices on how to treat children: *"In our society, children will always be children, and are not allowed to speak when parents or adults are speaking, in fact they are not even supposed to be in the room when adults are speaking, unless they are invited"*.

Educators felt that during the SGB meetings all stakeholders, including learners, were given a fair chance to deliberate and negotiate in an open discussion: *"All SGB members tolerate and respect one another and the vote is being taken as a measure to decide on the matter"*.

The educators felt that learners had the power to oppose or support an idea: *"Learners have a power to oppose or support an idea"*. This is a positive sign that shows that the school governance representatives were adhering to elements of democratic participation.

Finally, the educators were of the opinion that communication was good and every stakeholder was kept informed. They felt that learners who were

members of the SGB were ready to be future leaders: *“We empower them on skills such as communication skills, listening, power sharing, planning and many others”*. This is a positive sign.

Summary implications and theory linkages for School E

School E was not different from other schools in the treatment of learners in the structure of school governance. The educators here were not confident whether the SGB was able to solve problems in their school: *“We are not sure whether our SGB is able to solve problems in our school”*.

At this school, the educators believed that learners were not given a chance, but they were in the school governance for the sake of being there, just to grace the SGB: *“In my school learners are not given a chance, they are in the governing body just for the sake of being there to make the required number needed”*.

The educators said they did not have any criteria for the election of learner representatives on the SGB, but at the same time they also said that learners did not elect themselves but were elected by an SMT member: *“There is no criterion that is followed during the election of learner representative council, but learners are elected by the school management team”*.

The educators felt that representation was not fair, given that there were three parents, three educators and two learners. They themselves felt that considering the number of learners in the school, learners should be in the majority on the SGB: *“I do not believe this is a fair number as learners are in the majority if we are to consider the number of learners in the school as a whole. There are three parents, three educators and two learners — a boy and a girl. The boy reports to the boys and a girl reports to the girls”*.

There was no inclusive participation of all stakeholders. Educators felt that in most cases learners were left out of the decision-making process. They felt that learners did not contribute much during the meetings as they just sat idly and did nothing to contribute to the discussions: *“In most cases, learners are left out. They do not have a say in the meetings, they sit and smile. In some meetings they are not even invited”*. Because of this lack of inclusivity in the school governance, no one was prepared to help involve learners because other stakeholders did not regard them as equal partners.

Educators said that there was a person who was tasked to report to the learners who were members of the SGB when they were absent from meetings, so that they could report back to learners about decisions taken during their absence: *“If some decisions are taken, there is someone who is tasked to report to them so as to report back to other learners”*. I believe this should not be done this way as learners are also decision-makers in the structure of governance.

In the educators' view, there was no difference in the way parents and educators treated the learners. They said that learners were called after the closure of the meeting as they were not supposed to be there when issues were being discussed: *“Parents and educators treat them similarly. They call the learners after the meeting and tell them what they have decided on, without them being involved in decision-making”*.

Exclusion on the grounds of age was dominant in the school. Educators felt that learners were treated as children (“kids”), as children were not supposed to take any kind of decision. They said that learners were given a chance to take decisions in matters such as sport, tours or farewell functions: *“They are taken as kids and are not supposed to take decisions unless it is in sport, tours and farewell functions, which they are allowed to organise”*.

The educators felt that the treatment given to learners was not fair, and that learners did not stand a chance in the structure of school governance. Most of the time, according to educators, learners would not make any suggestions, but would agree on what was arrived at in the meeting: *“I do not think this is fair, because they are not given a chance to oppose”*.

At this school, educators also believed that learners were not given a platform to deliberate on matters. They felt that other stakeholders had a negative attitude towards learners, and as a result their involvement was not taken seriously: *“Most of the time there are no suggestions that come from learners, but if I give you my own opinion I think there is no room to say a thing for them. They just agree on what the educators and parents say”*.

Finally, educators felt that there was no kind of training for to learners who were part of the SGB, and they were not even supported. They said that learners themselves knew that they were not being taken seriously: *“I never heard of any training given to them. They are not even supported”*.

Based on the facts from the summary implications and theory linkages, findings could be summarised as follows: Educators were not very eager to accept learners as participants in the structure of school governance. Various non-participatory measures that came to the fore in each school were a lack of freedom, a lack of equality, a lack of fair opportunities, manipulation of individual rights, a lack of free development of all members, domination of social and cultural traditions, illegitimate decision-making and misuse of the majority rule principle.

Because of the above findings I bring into play the relevance of Habermas’s theory to the South African school governance system. Although one might hesitate to translate this model to the realities of South African society, the aspirations expressed by Habermas have an undoubted appeal. I am confident that if communicative action were to be employed, some of the problems in the structure of school governance could be eliminated.

The relevance of Habermasian theory to South African school governance

In the context of school governance, Habermas’s argument will relate to how democratic participation and decision-making can be promoted without impeding socio-cultural differences. In other words, his debates will hinge on democratically representing difference without thereby sanctioning injustice and intolerance for SGB stakeholders.

For members of school governance, preferences will be transformed through the active exchange of ideas, including not just voicing opinions, but listening, because through the act of engaging and listening stakeholders can be persuaded and their thinking transformed. This combination will allow

stakeholders to understand and agree with one another and to make plans for common action for the benefit of their school.

With reference to the Habermasian notion of discursive democracy for school governance, his account could be of significant value since teachers and learners have to engage in deliberation and reflection to convince each other of what they have to say in their structure of governance, and more especially during meetings for the sake of a better argument.

I also hold that inclusion and consensus in schools could be achieved by adopting Habermas's notion of consensus through deliberation and reasoning. Members of school governance could benefit from his views in the sense that their argument could rest on how to promote democratic participation and decision-making without impeding on socio-cultural differences which seem to be clouding progress in the SGB structure at the moment.

The idea of communicative action is the one type of action that Habermas says uses all human ways of thinking, as well as language. Such a combination could allow all SGB stakeholders to understand and agree with one another and to make plans for the common good of the issue at stake. This is what is really needed in the school governance structure where stakeholders need to think and act rationally so as to produce better arguments.

Through such an approach, SGB stakeholders would be free to exchange ideas. They would not only voice opinions, but they would also listen to others' points of view. Ultimately, through the act of engaging and listening, participants could be persuaded and their thinking be transformed.

Consensus would be achievable in the structure of school governance through deliberation and reasoning in which all stakeholders participate. It would be through the ability of stakeholders to advance arguments and counterarguments that democratic participation could be achieved.

Deliberative arguments could enable SGB stakeholders, and more especially learners, to be free to express their opinions, and have the freedom to discuss matters for the common good of their school.

Conclusion

I have argued that, in the structure of school governance, Habermas's argument of 'communicative action' and 'consensus' will rest on how to promote democratic participation and decision-making. With his notion of discursive democracy, Habermas's approach could be of value since educators and learners have to engage in deliberation and reflection for inclusive governance. I have suggested communicative action as an alternative, as it is rooted in democratic ideals. This alternative focuses on the reasoning that if an exchange of points of view should be unconstrained, then it follows that no individual or group of people could legitimately exclude others from deliberating on any matters that interest them.

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