

The rights and roles of parents on school governing bodies in South Africa

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The South African Schools Act of 1996 mandates the establishment of school governing bodies (SGBs) comprising parents, educators and non-educator members of staff. Since parents form the majority on SGBs they have been placed in a powerful position and are able to influence the school budget, language policy, discipline and the appointment and promotion of teaching and administrative staff. In addition, the new structure of school governance provides the opportunity to establish a new relationship between the state and parents, set a new direction for education, and provide a learning space where the critical skills of civic capacity might be extended. This paper examines the extent to which this has been achieved. Data was obtained by means of a questionnaire completed by parents and teachers, followed by in-depth interviews with selected principals and school governing body members. Findings suggest that problems still exist around issues of marginalisation of black parents in racially mixed schools, levels of education of parent governors, poverty and lack of resources in rural communities and a lack of understanding between governance and management of schools. Ways in which the rights and roles of parents in school governance can be improved are included in the paper.

Decentralisation and school governance

The concept of decentralisation originates from the belief that the state alone cannot control schools, but should share its power with other stakeholders, particularly those closer to the school, on a partnership basis (Marishane 1999:78). It is argued that the devolution of authority will lead to a healthier and stronger relationship between schools and communities and provide an alternative form of accountability to bureaucratic surveillance (Gamage 1994:45-46). This is based on the premise that when schools and communities collaborate in making important decisions about educational alternatives, a true mutual responsibility will grow. Thus advocates of decentralisation base their reforms on the assumption that to ensure improvement in schools, those closest to the learners should be offered the authority to make key decisions (Parker & Leithwood 2000:38).

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Political and ideological bases for decentralization

Wright (1997: 1) maintains that "high priority is always given to education reconstruction in national strategies for positive social transformation". This means that education is often seen as symbolic in bringing about normality in society, through a process of democratisation. In this, ideology plays an important role, as does the issue of power (Levin 1998:134). In South Africa structural pluralism or separatism was always a significant feature of education. However, this became more formalised through legislation and was vigorously implemented during the rule of the National Party from 1948 to 1994 (Jansen 2001:12). Opposition to the racially based education system in the country developed into large-scale political rebellion during the 1970's (Behr 1984:195). Although the government responded by launching various reform initiatives, education continued to be based on race and relied on a great deal of state control. By the late 1980 educational provision for the different racial groups in South

Africa differed markedly as did the role parents played in schools (Hartshorne 1999:83).

Following the first democratic elections held in South Africa in 1994 the restructuring of education was placed high on the political agenda. The kind of decentralisation that has emerged has been shaped by the need to deal with a number of conflicting local issues and interests. These include the attempt to reconcile the quest for equity with the resources the state is able to allocate to education; the move towards a more equitable distribution of resources among schools while maintaining the middle class within the public school system; the need to reconcile the rights and responsibilities of individual schools with the wider national interests; the quest for greater democratic rights for stakeholders while maintaining the professional integrity and accountability of school managers and the state employees (Department of Education (DE) 2004:38). Against this background there is now considerable interest in the way School Governing Bodies (SGBs) establish working relationships with all stakeholders in schools to enable schools to function according to community and national needs.

School governance in South Africa

Following the general elections of 1994 a new system of education and training has been created in South Africa based on the fundamental principles of democracy, unity, non-discrimination, equity and equality (Squelch 2000:137). This means, among others, that government is committed to the development of a democratic system that provides for participation of all stakeholders with a vested interest in education (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 1996, section 16). The provisions for school governance included in the South African Schools Act (hereafter SASA) were put into effect in May 1997 when the first official SGBs were elected (Karlsson, McPherson & Pampallis 2001:163).

Composition of school governing bodies (SGBs)

According to the SASA (RSA 1996, 18) the membership of SGB's should comprise *elected members*, the *school principal* and *co-opted members*. *Elected members* of the governing body shall comprise individuals from the following categories:

- parents of learners at the school
- educators at the school
- members of staff who are not educators
- learners in the eighth grade or higher at the school.

Regardless of school size, parents always hold a majority through 50% plus one member representation. Only a parent who is not employed at the school may be appointed chairperson of the SGB. Governing bodies have the option of co-opting a member, or members, of the community to the governing body. The term of membership of the SGB is three years (except for learners who serve a one year period) and election occurs in the same year throughout South Africa.

Functions of SGBs

Subject to the SASA (RSA 1996: sections 20 & 21) the governing body of a public school must develop the mission statement of the school; adopt a code of conduct for learners of the school and determine the admission and language policy of the school. The school governing body may suspend learners from attending the school as a correctional measure for a period not exceeding one week, recommend the appointment of teaching (and other) staff at the school and deal with disciplinary hearings of teachers. The SGB should also support the principal, teachers and other staff in the school in the performance of their professional functions and supplement the resources supplied by the state to improve the quality of education provided by the school. In this regard parents may be asked to pay school fees. Such funds are administered by the governing body. The SGB may employ teachers additional to those allocated and salaried by the provincial departments of education as long as the school raises funds for these additional teachers. The SGB may also oversee the maintenance of school property and buildings.

These are extensive and complicated tasks and it has been observed with concern that some functions of SGBs are contingent on social conditions of schools as well as capacity differential of SGBs. This has the potential of entrenching existing social inequalities at schools (Karlsson 2002:331). This imbalance or 'policy gap' between policy intentions and practice outcomes highlight the need for special efforts to ensure participatory democratic processes in school governance in all schools (Karlsson 2002:335; Sayed 2002:29).

Research Methodology

The research on the roles parents play in school governance in South Africa involved two successive stages: (a) a questionnaire completed by a 70 of teachers attending a workshop; and (b) detailed interviews conducted by the researcher and two field workers with 44 participants serving on school governing bodies.

Although most items on the questionnaire completed in the first stage of the research were closed, space was also provided for comments or explanatory notes. Thus the questionnaires also served as a "self revealing document" (Blase & Blase 1999:355) or "first-person document" which "describes an individual's actions, experiences and beliefs" about a particular phenomenon (Schumacher & MacMillan 1993:434). In addition, in-depth interviews were conducted with principals, teachers and parents serving on school governing bodies. All the interviews were audio taped and later fully transcribed. The transcriptions, together with the additional comments elicited by the questionnaires, comprise the qualitative data in this research. The analysis of this data - which Hatch (2002:148) refers to a "a systematic search for meaning" - was done according to procedures typical of qualitative research. Extracts from the raw data were selected and either paraphrased or quoted to illustrate the patterns

Findings

Although the majority of participants are from deprived communities (both urban and rural) a significant number represent well-resourced schools. The findings derived from the research therefore demonstrate a wide variation of experiences and perceptions of school governance.

Parent representation remains unequal in most schools

Although the South African Schools Act provides for representation of all major stakeholders on school governing bodies, Carrim (2001:106) argues that significant actors could be excluded. For example, the school may have the prescribed number of parent representatives, but all could be white, irrespective of the school's learner demographics. Principals in this research confirmed that the SGBs of their schools did not represent the racial distribution of the learners at the schools. Most claimed that this was because "*black parents did not want to become involved*". However, no one had tried to determine if this perception was correct. Likewise, the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance (DE 2004:52) concludes that even in racially homogenous settings, SGBs are dominated by the better educated and the economically more stable members of the community. The Committee also confirmed that while there is a transformation in the racial structure of school governing bodies, such transformation is incongruent with the learner population within the school.

Unequal participation of role players

In South Africa parents, educators, non-teaching staff, the principal and co-opted community members serve on the SGB. However, it seems as if the role played by the members of the SGB is not equal.

The role of the school principal/head teacher

In South Africa principals serve as ex-officio members of the SGB and may not chair the meetings of this body. However, research referred to by Karlsson (2002: 332) shows that principals still play a dominant role in meetings and decision-making. This is attributed to the principal's position of power within the school, level of education in contrast to members, first access to information issuing from education authorities, and because it is the principal who executes the decisions taken. When asked to indicate whether the school principal dominates the SGB, 41 percent of teachers included in this research said "*yes*", 38 percent said "*no*", whereas 21 percent said that they "*did not know*". One teacher had this to say of the principal of his school: "*She dominates the SGB — she is the key player. She wants things done her own way, she does not take the school's interest into consideration*". One principal considered the role of the SGB as providing "*general support*" and admitted to playing a dominant role in the SGB. A parent serving on a SGB in a rural community stated that the dominance of principals can also be attributed to them withholding information from SGB members: "*Principals deliberately hide information from us probably because they do not want SGB members to be informed or to be empowered*." This seems consistent with research conducted in other countries which shows that the principal is essentially in charge, with the governors having little impact upon the school's direction (Creese & Earley 1999:6).

On the other hand, principals also stated that the role of SGB members is often not clearly understood and that some members attempt to get involved in the management of the school. One principal explained:

The changes have brought conflict and authority and responsibility. Some SGB members do not know where their powers start and end. They confuse school governance with school management. They sometimes want to take over the professional leadership role of the principal.

This is particularly true of affluent communities where parents are well educated and tend to try to dominate events at school.

The role of parents

In spite of having the majority representation on the SGB, many parents serving on SGBs are reticent and rely on the principal and teachers for leadership and guidance in decision-making. Karlsson (2002:332) ascribes this to parents' weak understanding of their role, a capacity deficit in the range of skills needed to perform governance functions and irregular attendance of meetings. Some teachers interviewed feel strongly that parents' roles on the SGB should be reduced even more and that teachers as "*enlightened professional people who know about children*" should not be placed in a position where they could be outvoted by parents. A number of teachers also felt that parents did not fully understand the SASA and the power and responsibilities it afforded school governors, adding: "*Most of them are illiterate and therefore fail to execute the tasks delegated to them.*" It therefore seems that, in spite of being in the majority, parents do not play a significant role in school governance.

The role of teachers

In South Africa, educators form a minority on SGB's. In spite of this, Karlsson (2002: 332) contends that educators have the greatest participation in decision-making after the principal and play a far greater role than members representing non-educator staff, parents and learners. Mabasa and Themane (2002:115) agree adding that principals and teachers dominate SGB meetings and expect their recommendations to be accepted by all members without any further discussion. Some parents interviewed complained that teachers "*looked down on them*" and "*did not treat them with respect*".

Contextual issues impact on school governing bodies

Socio-Economic factors and equity

Whether decentralisation results in greater equity or inequity depends to a large extent on the schools' sources of funding. Where schools are expected to raise their own funds to supplement state funding, this has the potential of increasing inequity, since poorer communities are less able to provide for themselves than relatively well-endowed ones.

In addition, wealthier and more influential communities often have the political muscle to ensure that they gain better access to state resources and are able to supplement meagre state allocations with their own private contributions (Karlsson et al 2001:146).

These contributions can be used, among others, to employ additional teachers. A likely outcome is that in the long run there will be a systematic inequality between a small number of rich schools for whites and middle-class blacks and a majority of poorly resourced, mainly black schools (Weber 2001:285).

Lack of skills of parents influence participation

The Ministerial Review Committee (DE 004:91) report notes that 47 percent of teachers and principals interviewed felt that skills deficit among SGB members weaken the effective functioning of SGBs. This research found similar evidence. As one teacher explained: "*SGB members lack confidence and are not sure about their duties.*" One educator said that this resulted in their depending on the principal "*... who uses his professional powers to influence the SGB*". Where teachers felt the SGB was not effective, it was often attributed to a lack of interest in the school, low levels of literacy and lack of training, which led one teacher to suggest that "*SGB should have members who were involved in education, for example ex-principals and ex-teachers and not so many illiterate parents*". As Maile (2002:329) puts it: "Illiteracy precludes parents from accessing relevant management information." This is important for South Africa where more than ten million people above the age of 20 were unable to attend school or only completed primary school education (DE 2004:183).

Contextual limitations

One third of the survey respondents included in the Ministerial Review Committee Report (DE 2004:149) attributed deficient SGB functioning to contextual limitations, such as lack of public transport, the distance between place of residence and the school and time of meetings. In this research participants included societal problems such as poverty and the prevalence of HIV/AIDS in the community. In these circumstances, even the extensive social support networks developed in communities – their social capital- are subject to immense strain and cannot easily be put to use for the purpose of building structures within the school (DE 2004:48). As one SGB member commented: "*The number of orphans is on the rise, whether due to HIV/AIDS or not, I cannot tell. But one thing for sure we cannot feed the needy and hungry learners that we have at the school*". Such problems leave little resources or energy for other issues such as participative school governance.

Another contextual issue which impacts on some schools is that of gangsters and violence within the community. As a legal structure tasked with ensuring the safety and discipline of learners in the school, the SGBs are required to play a role.

However, the problem is more complex and other societal issues, such as a lack of parental guidance, unemployment and lack of values also contribute to violence and gangsterism. The need to address the situation before it gets out of hand was realized by one teacher governor:

Vulnerable learners and teacher end-up being victims of these gangsters or thugs that have become a threat to peace and order in our communities. Drug misuse and abuse result in irresponsible thugs walking the streets. In the final analyses nobody will be safe.

These are difficult issues which SGB members are not always able to address effectively.

Directing the school's future

Decentralised school governance includes taking decisions which will influence the future of the school.

Participation in policy formulation

In South Africa SGBs are tasked with drawing up the mission statement of the school. This means that the SGB should have an image of what the school could be like, and should try to capture the character, identity and reason for a school's existence and the parameters within which the school acts. Governors should also ensure that this policy is so clear, consistent and reasonable, that it can be implemented and that all the staff complies with it in the performance of their duties (Marishane 1999: 84). However, this calls for a sound knowledge of schooling, good writing skills and the ability to verbalise the content to others in an effective manner - skills which many school governors do not have (Gallagher 1992: 28).

The governing body is also legally empowered, after consultation with educators, parents and learners, to adopt a code of conduct for learners and must ensure that learners abide by it. Mambane (2000:21) argues that the inclusion of parents in developing a code of conduct for schools will help the school adopt more positive procedures for dealing with transgressions of the rules. An overwhelming 91 percent of the educators who answered the questionnaire supported the involvement of the SGB in maintaining discipline at school. One educator explained: *"The SGB represents the parents of learners so they must be involved in disciplining them."* Another added: *"...these learners come from the very community that they*

(the SGB members) serve, it is their children." However, a number of educators stipulated that SGBs should be involved in disciplinary issue only if a serious offence has been committed and only after the principal has attempted to deal with the matter.

Teacher appointments and promotion

Although teacher appointments and promotion is one of the functions of SGBs a significant number of teachers interviewed were opposed to this function. They maintained that *"the school governing body does not have the expertise to do so."* Furthermore, they felt that SGB members often looked for *"... people whom they know even though they do not know that person's qualification"*. This was reiterated by another teacher: *"Sometimes the members of SGB have relatives at school so they may choose their relatives and do not consider the competence of educators."*

Most principals in schools serving affluent communities feel strongly that the SGB should continue to play a role in staff promotion and selection as they aware of the needs of the school and community and would therefore know which educators to select or promote.

Financial management

In the more affluent schools principals expressed satisfaction with the role SGBs were playing in the financial management of the school as that there were many professionals in the parent community equal to this task. However, in more deprived communities, educators had reservations about the SGB's competence to handle financial matter. Only 47 percent were satisfied with the way this was being done. One teacher explained: *"The SGB is not well trained that is why they do not know what is expected of them with regard to the finances."* Another added: *"They only sign cheques, they don't work according to the budget. There is no financial committee. They do not participate in fund-raising of the school."*

Participation in curriculum issues

In South Africa the SGB does not have much say over curriculum matters. However, the introduction of a new curriculum stipulates that parents, educators and community are tasked with "helping to determine how learners should be prepared for adult life, including the world of work" (Gauteng Department of Education, 1997:13). Most school governors feel ill equipped to fulfil this role. Van Langen and Dekkers (2001:380) add that decentralisation brings with it the possibility of extreme inequalities - "the possibility that the local community, including parents and educators, may not have the

knowledge and resources to adequately protect the quality of education provided to their children." This sentiment is shared by many of the participants interviewed. One principal even suggested that academic issues had nothing to do with school governors and they should not "*poke their nose in where it does not belong*".

Parents also expressed the opinion that they know very little of curriculum matters and were reluctant to become involved. Moreover, many parent governors in rural schools are illiterate or semi-illiterate and perceive their involvement in curriculum matters as an encroachment in the professional terrain of educators. One parent commented: "*Many of us battle to understand some of the terms used. Besides we are not as highly educated like the educators.*"

One principal in a rural school added: "*Parental participation with regard to deciding about school curriculum seems to be a challenging task for all of us. In fact many parents feel that this is a matter to be deliberated upon by educators.*"

The need for training of school governors

The shift to decentralized school governance and management requires SGB members to develop a wide range of skills and capacity to deal with the complex issues and tasks they are expected to fulfill. Teachers often mentioned the necessity of providing appropriate training for school governors, particularly the parent representatives. They also suggested that the SGB members should receive copies of the SASA in their own language and undergo training on the content thereof by people fluent in the local vernacular. The Ministerial Review Committee Report (DE 2004) acknowledges that there is insufficient capacity concerning key dimensions of the work of school governance, such as managing accounts, appointing educators, developing policies in critical areas such as language, discipline, religion and the fee structure of the school. One teacher maintained: "*The workshops for the training of SGBs should be improved. Follow-ups should be made to evaluate their performance. No follow-ups, no improvement.*" Another teacher added: "*The SGB, especially the parents, needs to be workshopped. In my area, for instance, they are illiterate. The Department of Education needs to educate these parents to at least the level of grade 4 or 6.*" A parent who had been trained expressed his opinion: "*Without training we can fumble a lot but with training we can see where we are going.*" Educators also felt

that parents who had received some form of training should be issued with a certificate. Although principals of schools in affluent communities felt that the SGB members of their schools were well educated they felt that they did not always understand the contexts of schools and should also be trained. This is supported in the literature where concern is raised that many parents do not want to serve on SGBs because they believe that they lack the expertise a governor requires (Morgan, Fraser, Dunn & Cairns 1992:18). In addition, ignorance and incapacity to perform certain functions tend to cause governing bodies to function only as crisis committees (Karlsson et al 2001:169).

Conclusions

Changing where and how decisions are made does not guarantee that better, more efficient, or more effective school practices will result (Eliason 1996: 92). Thus, experiences with decentralisation in education are somewhat mixed and often disappointing. In South Africa a form of decentralisation has evolved that is strong in terms of devolution, but weak in terms of managing the disparate and often discriminatory proclivities and tendencies within local sites. Thus, it can be argued that in ceding power to the local site, the model in use in South Africa has failed to take account of diversity at the local level. The result of this decentralisation is the emergence of a number of different types of governing bodies (DE 2004:39). In this regard, Roos (in Fleisch, 2002) argues that despite legislation, most SGBs in South Africa conform to the traditional type, acting as a rubber stamp for the principal. In this model the role of parents is negligible. At the other extreme SGBs (mainly from former 'white' schools) often see themselves as a board of directors and, like an enterprise, have the job of setting the direction of the school. In this model the principal is the CEO, with responsibility for day-to-day operations. This model has the danger that the SGB can take control of the school and eventually dictate to teachers how to manage their professional responsibilities. A third model, found in a number of schools, is where governing bodies act in line with the intent of the legislation and are crafting new relationships between parents and school managers. The challenge is to determine how this model can be extended to all schools in the country.

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