

HOW SCHOOL ROLE PLAYERS PERCEIVE DISTRIBUTED SCHOOL GOVERNANCE?

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Abstract

Amendments to the South African Schools Act –SASA, (Act 84 of 1996), have changed public school governance. These changes have had a domino effect on how public schools function today. School Governing Bodies (SGB) as the major role-players in public school governance have experienced its effect. In this article we explore the perceptions of school role-players involved in school governance in Gauteng (a province in South Africa).

Keywords: accountability; deliberative democracy; participation; school governance

1 INTRODUCTION

School governance in South Africa has moved from a highly centralised structure to what is supposed to be one of shared responsibility. The South African Schools Act [1] provides for parents to be an integral part of school governance. This article will make a fresh contribution to the existing body of knowledge by showing how school governance is furtively being re-centralised and also offering credible reasons for the State renegeing on its original promises and intentions in 1996.

There is an inextricable relationship between democracy, education and school governance. After twenty years of constitutional democracy, the disturbing percentage of dysfunctional schools raises questions about distributed or shared school governance. In this article we report on the findings of the qualitative research on the perceptions of school governing body (SGB) members on governance of schools in Gauteng (a province in South Africa) in 2013-2014. We use interviews with School Governing Bodies (SGB) in six schools in different school districts in Gauteng to gather data. SGBs are the vehicles of Education policies, since they, must convey the States' decisions on school governance to their communities. Who better than they can evaluate school governance? One of the researchers experienced several undemocratic features in school governance in many schools which he found was the result of systemic flaws.

1.1 Problem statement, and concept clarification

School governance in public schools in South Africa has been transformed because of amendments to existing legislation which had the outcome of changing the decision making powers of the School Governing Body (SGB), accorded to it by the South African Schools Act [1]. The establishment of school governing bodies was a meaningful benchmark in the state's move towards distributing school governance to local communities. Such decentralisation meant an increase in democratic participation in the governance of schools. School governance as practiced today does not reflect shared governance; the picture that surfaces at school level does not show the SGB as partners, having any constructive decision- making power. The obverse picture emerges, namely one, which cautions against too much involvement by the SGB. The SGBs power has been modified through amendments to the SASA particularly as concerns the following:

- the admission of learners to public schools
- the control of school finances in a latent form of financial management

1.1.1 Objectives

Our objectives in this article are to:

- report on the perceptions of SGBs in a sample of Gauteng public schools related to the rights, obligations and functions of members regarding the governance of a public school; and
- investigate the ostensible inclination of the state to question and doubt the authority and capabilities of school governing bodies, to the extent of taking steps to limit the involvement and powers of role-players concerning the appointment of educators, admission of learners and effective financial management..

2 THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Conflict theory emphasises the role of coercion and power in producing social order. This perspective is derived from the works of Karl Marx [2] who saw society as fragmented into groups that compete for social and economic resources. Social order is maintained by domination, with power vested in the hands of those with the greatest political, economic, and social resources. When consensus exists, it is attributable to people being united around common interests, often in opposition to other groups. Ritzer, (id) theorised that the work of producing consensus was done in the "superstructure" of society--which is composed of state controlled bodies (one of these in South Africa are public schools), political structures, and culture--and what it produced consensus for, was the "base," authoritarianism. According to conflict theory, inequality exists because those in control of a disproportionate share of society's resources actively defend their advantages [3]. The school/SGB are not bound to the state by their shared values, but by intimidation (through Education officials) who use contractual compliance to elicit subservience and this ensures the state's authority over school governance. This authoritarian perspective emphasises social domination, through employing the ideology, and hegemonic rhetoric of the African National Congress (ANC) [4]. This results in an imbalance of power, wherein the minority in the upper classes control political power, and thus they make the rules of society in a way that privileges their continued accumulation of wealth, at the economic and political expense of the majority of society, who provide most of the labour required for society to function [3]. The power of the state (ANC) is present in the Education departments' bureaucrats, who act as purveyors of the state's policies to maintain the established hierarchical order [4]. Economic power is also guaranteed for the new black African elite. This bourgeois class uses [5] its economic power to exert political influence [6]. The extremely wealthy black African elite, thus turn their economic power into political power, which in turn protects their economic interests, and ensures their hold on both forms of power [7].

The principle of fairness when confronted by this authoritarianism is constantly challenged by the realities of inequalities, and the solution lies in the ANC trying to resolve the situation through politics and welfare benefits, like the Public School Nutrition Programme (PSNP) [6].

3 SGBS VERSUS BUREAUCRACY IN PUBLIC SCHOOL GOVERNANCE

3.1 Background

The decentralisation of school governance in South Africa in 1996, and a series of bureaucratic actions and intrusive interference by education administrators have led to legal battles that indicate a wilful disregard for, or a lack of knowledge of the democratic values and principles that are necessary to promote effectiveness and efficiency in education. The promotion of the ANC government's ideology of transformation and equity in the drive for State hegemony manifested in actions like the:

- Amendments to legislation when SGBs had won legal battles over the attempts by the provincial education authorities to re-centralise control and power in key issues in education.

In this context, the controversial actions and decisions of the State raises the concern that democracy in education is being compromised, and as a result, that the efficiency and optimal effectiveness of distributed or shared school governance is being undermined.

3.1.1 Democracy in Education

The word democracy has become context bound, however the common core principles of liberal democracy include the notions of shared governance by the people, either directly through participation and deliberation, or indirectly through accountable and responsive representatives fairly by majority vote[7]. Furthermore, democracy entails state protection of fundamental political and civil rights in terms of the rule of law and that the power of democratic institutions and pluralist interests are controlled by checks and balances and the distribution of power that would have been held by the centre (the State) [8] . The South African Constitution embraces an integrated model that postulates an indirect representative democracy and protection of the individual's fundamental rights. It also encompasses, direct deliberative and participatory mechanisms, measures in institutions that the State shares power with [9].

The envisaged form of school governance post-1994, as contained in the South African Schools Act (1996), proposes shared responsibility in the Education of the child. South Africans are justified in assuming that it is their right to expect that the redesigned school system for a democratic South Africa would be tangibly new, more equitable, and empowering to all who have a direct stake in the success of schooling [10]. The state foresaw that through fomenting a partnership with communities, schools would become desegregated since parents from different race groups would participate in its governance.

However there is little evidence to show that desegregation as envisaged by SASA through integrated schooling has succeeded; differences still arise because of race and culture in daily classroom life [11]. Chisholm [12] justifies her assertion by referring to the much publicised media reports that has shown that South Africans are strongly xenophobic. The academic debate on anti-racism and critical multiculturalism have not filtered down to the level of the school and even more crucially, to classroom practice in South Africa. This has resulted in vast differences in education standards between township schools and ex-model C schools. Bureaucratic meddling and maladministration has exacerbated the divide, [13].

If the South African education system achieves a measure of success, it will be able to provide its society with future workers, who possess skills, knowledge, values, and attitudes that will enable them to be employed [14]. It is the researcher's assertion, from personal experience as a Principal and Deputy Director of the Department of Education (DoE), that Governance of public schools has been scarred by some of the legislation and policies for schooling, which is constantly being subjected to a process of transformation and revision. What was the likely effect of curriculum changes on the finances of poor schools? Schools were resourced with learner and teacher support material (LTSM) by the state. Most of the state subsidy for the school was intended for this purpose (SASA, 1996: Section 20 "schools-Financing"). Teachers are still grappling with the tenets of Outcomes Based Education; even, the costly Learner Teacher Support Material (LTSM) did not improve learner performance. Instead it exacerbated the situation, both financially and motivationally, since these schools were now branded as being "under-performing" schools [15].Sayed and Motala [16] explains that "great strides have been made towards racial equity in terms of state per capita expenditure per learner, but more contentious is the extent to which redress or differential spending has been achieved".

The inherent conflict arising between the macro levels (DoE) and the micro level (Schools) concerning school governance, particularly in the handling of Educational policies has often been reported in South African newspapers. This leads to an inherent tension between the State and schools. [17]. Bureaucratic expectations of SGBs is that they comply with what is expected by the State through the policies; any deviation is seen as an act of defiance.

3.1.2 *Bureaucratic meddling in school Governance*

Weber [18], explains bureaucracy, as a system of administration with the following characteristics: hierarchy; impersonality (the work is conducted according to set rules, without arbitrariness or nepotism, and with little flexibility or discretion to digress); continuity (the administrative offices constitute full-time salaried occupations, with security of employment and prospects for regular advancement); and expertise (officials are selected on merit, are trained for their function, and control access to knowledge and information because written record is kept of transactions).

However, apart from the positive features that improve the efficient and effective functioning of an institution, bureaucracy is also associated with negative qualities such as 'red tape', non-accountability, unresponsiveness, delay, inflexibility, ineptitude, centralised superiority and undemocratic predispositions [19].

This article focuses on the contentious aspects in education, the term bureaucracy (also education administration) will be used to denote these negative features.

The tensions between the demands and values of democracy and the Department of Education's reliance on bureaucracy have not dissipated. The introduction of distributed school governance encompasses multiple role-players, but the State has resolved to increase bureaucratic interference in school governance whose only outcome can be to surreptitiously re-centralise school governance, as is evident in what occurred in the admission fiasco at Rivonia Primary school:

In 2010, a prospective Grade1 learner was unsuccessful in finding placement at that school for the academic year starting in 2011, and was placed on the school's waiting list. According to the school, it had reached its capacity of 120 learners in that grade, as provided for in its admission policy. Dissatisfied, the mother of the learner sought recourse with the Department of Education and then also lodged an appeal with the Gauteng Member of the Provincial Executive (MEC). Accordingly, the matter was taken up by the MEC for Education, Gauteng, and the school principal was instructed to admit the learner to the school. The Gauteng Head of the Department of Education (HOD) purported to withdraw the principal's admission function and delegated it to another official. Gauteng Department of Education officials proceeded to take control of the situation and thereafter physically placed the learner in one of the school's Grade 1 classrooms, seating her at an empty desk that had been installed for a learner with attention and learning difficulties [20]. The HOD-GDE usurped the principal of Rivonia primary school's management functions (acting on behalf of the SGB) to admit learners to the school.

There is a dichotomy between school governance and the professional management of the school [21]. It is noteworthy that the term "management" is not used generically, but that it is specifically called "professional management"[21]. A justifiable conclusion is that the concept "professional management" refers to exactly that – "management of the profession and the school [21]". This function is precisely that of the school's senior management team (SMT), with the principal as senior manager overseeing this function. In the relevant sections of SASA the school governing body's tasks, are clearly prescribed. It is the governing body's duty to "marry" the interests of the different parties concerned with educating the child; to ensure that the school provides quality education, while also managing a financially sound school.

According to section 16(3) of SASA, the professional management of a public school must be undertaken by the principal, under the authority of the Head of Department (Province). In addition professional management of the school must be undertaken subject to the SASA itself and any applicable provincial law. In any governance and management environment, the role players should be equipped with the specifics of what is expected of them and that each other's functions are respected. If these aspects are denied then eventually it results in conflict – legal and social,[22]. The legal wrangling is something we are all too familiar with in the context of the relationship between governing bodies and the department of education [23].

Effective school governance, and management of a school make the difference between a functional and a dysfunctional school [24]. The importance of the rapport between a principal and the school governing body for the proper functioning of a school is of the essence. This relationship can often be compromised by meddling from Education officials who exercise control over the principal because they are the employer. The explanation of the two concepts “governance” and “management”, evidence the function of a public school principal as twofold: On the one hand, he/she is accountable to the Head of Department (Provincial) as his/her employer; on the other, he/she reports to the school governing body as an ex-officio member of the school governing body. Therefore, it is possible for the principal to receive instructions from the bureaucrats representing the Provincial Department of Education (PED) and the particular District and another, contradictory assignment from the SGB.

In many instances as Prinsloo, [25] explains, a disconcerting trend has emerged of State officials exploiting their powers, by improperly impeding the management and governance of schools, disregarding their duties, showing no respect for the rule of law, and even ignoring court orders against them. The literature highlights a few court cases to confirm this disturbing phenomenon, [26] This is visibly corroborated by a senior ANC member and chairperson of a SGB who participated in this study: “There’s no structured avenues for voices whereas previously the ANC government was keen to have participatory space for communities on all levels of government whether it was schools, clinics or hospitals, now the power is with bureaucrats and politicians “(Interview 8 Ln 749-755).

A good example is the “Batho Pele” principles, which act as a guide for Education policy, and which means, “Putting people first”[27]. The “Batho Pele” initiative aims to enhance the quality and accessibility of government services by improving efficiency and accountability to the recipients of public goods and services. It entails the obligation to keep customers regularly informed, establish service standards, provide greater access to services, as well as greater openness and transparency, and to repair failures and rectify mistakes [28]. However what happens at school level seems to contradict the principles of “Batho Pele”. The ongoing incapacity of most provincial education departments in attempts to administer public schooling effectively, by improving accountability and efficiency, has been one of the catalysts for reactionary behaviour, as is seen in on-going teacher strikes. The governing bodies of schools become shocked and indecisive when teacher strikes occur, which again defeats the assurance provided by “Batho Pele”, namely, “to keep customers regularly informed”.

4 THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Most of the data in this research was obtained by using a qualitative approach. The qualitative analysis was supported by the results obtained from the quantitative interpretation of some of the items in the questionnaire. Some of the items in Section A served as independent variables and all the closed questions from Section B and C which were formulated in terms of scaled intervals served as dependent variables. They were analysed using quantitative techniques via SPSS 21.0. With respect to the qualitative collection of data, one-on-one and focus group interviews were conducted with role-players involved in school governance in six schools from various school districts in the South and East of Gauteng. The guiding criterion employed in selecting the schools for this study was not whether they represent the totality of schools in South Africa or even in one province, but rather that they make up a volume of types of schools in the South and East of Gauteng that comprise the collective case study. They were selected as they are scattered along a range of criteria, including level of resources according to the DoE’s quintile ranking where schools are divided into national quintiles and funded based on the relative wealth of the surrounding community (SA, 1998). Coupled with these quintile criteria the schools are differently positioned in respect of school governance and other educational reforms and influence exerted by unions. The two broad types of schools are target and better-positioned schools. This study has coined these terms and classify the two chosen types of schools as a target school, as one that has a low level of resources (financial as well as physical, human, social and capital resources) and the school population hail from households where income levels are relatively low. A better positioned school is one with a measurably higher level of resources, parental education levels are higher and household income is higher [29]. The schools ranking in terms of the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (NSSF) [29] was the basis to determine the relative income of the school and surrounding community. The NSSF [29] regulations are compiled by every province supplying a resource list, which ranks schools in the province in terms

of the “condition of the school and the relative poverty of the school community” A key consideration in the choice of schools was choosing two “no-fee” schools (target schools) because by declaring a school “no-fee” school, the State impacts on a key decision making function of the SGB because this function is re-centralised. Choosing a better positioned or markedly better resourced school should reveal major differences in perceptions about governance.

4.1 Analysis of the qualitative findings

Data was gathered from a series of focus group and one-on-one interviews with members of six SGBs. The findings emanating from the data were categorised under the following (table 1).

TABLE 1: ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Themes	Evidence from Interviews with SGBs
Control as a source of power	The appointment of educators has been taken over by the HOD. (Interview 8, Ln.171-178)
ANC-Hegemony	Problems like Nepotism bribery, is why you had to curtail the powers of the SGB (emphasis added). (Interview 6, Ln.163-167)
Financial management	I do not see how schools can function without school fees. The quintiles are allocated wrongly. (Interview 9, Ln. 396)

In order to reveal the rationale behind the themes arrived at they are now discussed:

4.1.1 Control as a source of power

As a result of the judicial victories for SGBs in the cases regarding the appointment and transfer of educators, the Department of Education (DoE) had the applicable disconcerting sections of the Schools Act and the Employment of Educators Act 60 and 61 amended in parliament on three occasions. The Education Laws Amendment Act, No. 48 of 1999 made provision for a time-frame within which a governing body must make its recommendations when an educator is appointed; the Education Laws Amendment Act, No. 53 of 2000 made provision for the appointment of educators to new public schools by the provincial Head of Department (and not a school governing body); and the Education Laws Amendment Act, No. 24 of 2005 provides that the SGB must recommend at least three candidates and the provincial Member of the Executive Council for Education (MEC) may appoint any of the recommended candidates. The MEC may accordingly disregard the school governing body’s preferred candidate and may appoint any candidate on the list of three recommended candidates, even if it is a less suitably qualified or experienced incumbent. The themes and supporting responses in Table 1 showed that participants’ perception towards the amendment to the policy determining the appointment and promotion of educators was that SGBs had lost their decision- making power over this crucial function. A disheartened school principal described the bureaucratic interference as follows: “The others were discarded on racial lines, it was argued by the Department that the management of the school was almost totally Indian and therefore the post was given to a Coloured incumbent”. (Interview 8, Ln.178-184). Yet another instance where a Black incumbent was appointed by the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE), contrary to the recommendation of the SGB arose at Roodepoort Primary School. A group of coloured parents started

protesting at the school on 21 February 2015, demanding a “coloured” principal be appointed. They claimed the process of appointing a black African female principal was flawed. The MEC for Education in Gauteng chose to remove the black African female principal from the school [30].

SGB members from a rural school emphasised how the State (GDE) controls schools and ignores school's policies and therefore the SGB: “The Principal or SGB, cannot declare the school full because the department has the right to verify and if they find there is space, they can say you have to take the child” (Interview 2, Line 227-231). The state demands complete control of school governance and subservience as reflected by these respondents: “You accept what you are told”. (Interview 3, Ln.454-463)

What would be the motive for the State's (through the DoE) covert actions? It can only be that school governance be re-centralised, so that the State reclaims power over schools. This wielding of power over others is the essence of authoritarianism and in this sense a political environment is an authoritarian environment [31]. Furthermore Sengé [31] says that such a political climate encourages game playing and blaming others. In order to build a non-political climate Sengé [31] states that we need to generate a climate where merit is the dominant force. In a climate where merit predominates, doing what is right also predominates over ‘who wants what done’. Furthermore Sengé [31] suggests that a climate where openness is present is essential. By openness he refers to both participative openness where one has the ‘freedom to speak one’s mind’ but also reflective openness where ‘one is prepared to challenge your own thinking’. But what Sengé[31] does not say is that it is easier to speak your mind if you have the political power of an overwhelming majority in parliament but more difficult to reflect on what you have said because you are in a position of power and do not see the necessity to reflect on anything, because you are right.

4.1.2 ANC-Hegemony - used to control SGB's

The term hegemony derives from ancient Greek word ‘hegemonia’ literally meaning the dominant and oppressive status of one element in the system over the others. According to Barrett,[32] hegemony involves ‘cooperation ensured by force’, combining social and political supervision, force and consent. It was within this context that the ANC began to reach for “hegemony”. Even if it could not have sole power, or even if the ANC had a less than the two-thirds majority it has in parliament and had to compete on its own against others; it would nonetheless demand a complete dominance over the entire system - and its culture. This determination comes from the testimony that the ANC wants to remain in power at all cost [33].

The Curriculum Education Specialist's [(CES) in the study] indicated that “problems like Nepotism and bribery, is why you had to **curtail the powers** of the SGB” (emphasis added)(Interview 6, Ln.163-167) in Table 1 above, reverberates a finding of the Ministerial Review committee commissioned by the then Minister of Education, K. Asmal, which found “While, African people are moving into former white, Indian and coloured schools in substantial numbers, they are still under-represented in those schools” [34]. Since 1999 the ANC led State, grasped desperately at affirmative action and equity, as the only “radical” policy to appease its Tri Partite alliance member, the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU) [35]. The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) an affiliate of COSATU demanded, through protest action like strikes that its members namely black African teachers be promoted above others. This gave rise to the State ignoring the SGBs’ recommendations and appointing a candidate who in most cases is a member of SADTU. This is substantiated by a focus group who were of the opinion that “If you have your observers present then they act as police. We are not concerned with the individual who’s going to gain from this or being bought. (Here the focus group is referring to the newspaper article where it is reported that officials and teachers pay SADTU to get promotion posts)(Interview 10, Ln.326-241) This action is justified by the DoE, through using the ANC’s ideological concepts, transformation and affirmative action. A focus group from a school in Johannesburg South verifies this by adding, “Presently you have cases where the candidate is not accepted for, either representatively or capacity” (Hence if the SGB’s recommended incumbent is not who GDE prefers, then the Department uses “representivity and capacity” to justify placing their desired candidate in the promotion post and rejects the SGB’s preferred candidate. (Interview 4,

Ln.163-164). It is noteworthy that transformation and affirmative action was the promise on which the Tri-partite alliance won the 1994 election (www.politicsweb.co.za/). The State next, had to fund public schools so that particularly the black African worker realistically experienced a material change [36].

4.1.3 *Financial management*

Respondents felt that, the Government's allocation of funds for schools were in some instances inadequate and the regulations governing its distribution were restrictive. One principal said "I do not see how schools can function without school fees." (Interview 9 Ln. 396). The National quintile a school falls within, determine the level of funding a school receives and respondents almost unanimously agreed that these were incorrectly arrived at. A typical quote from SGBs in focus groups was "the quintiles are allocated wrongly "(Interview 9 Ln. 397)

The findings in this study also contradict what the "No fees" school policy hoped to achieve, namely educational equality between the affluent and the poorer schools [37]. In reality the gap is fast becoming a chasm, as the department official so conclusively admits, namely "There was never ever going to be a possibility of parity. So I think we are deepening poverty and the differences between our learners." (Interview 6, Ln. 288-291).

However, it seems as if a paramount criterion in selecting a candidate for a promotion post is that "the State is an affirmative action employer." Loggenberg, [38] reports on what President Zuma's said, in what she entitles "Vote to benefit from Affirmative action" in the 2014 election campaign. It was reported that President Zuma promised coloured people in the Western Cape, that if they voted for the ANC they would reap the benefits of Affirmative action [39].

The best example is in 2013 when they wanted to apportion blame for Limpopo they chose the Director General, whereas the fault lay with Provincial government, since DoE design policy and the different provinces implement these policies. So provinces inability to implement shows a lack of skills and capacity, but who did the union target, wasn't those officials but the Minister of Basic Education and the DG and so the DG had to take the fall." (Interview 12, Ln.763-780)

The findings in this article relates unequivocally to Conflict Theory as espoused by Ritzer (1998) and namely that SGBs as the fourth tier of the ANC led government are expected to reflect the ANC ideology of transformation and equity, in order to maintain the ruling party's hegemony over schools as part of the political system. When this ideology namely transformation and equity does not permeate all schools which in South Africa is part of the political system, it spells the doom of the ANC's power over society since its loyal supporters and voters will become disillusioned. It is the electorate who ensure the ANC's domination and thus this hegemonic ideology must be preserved. Ritzer (2008) substantiates this reasoning when he asserts that a parochial political perspective is typical of a culture, embedded in a traditional environment. In South Africa, African cultures contain individuals who have a dim awareness of the larger political system beyond their immediate local environment[40].

5 CONCLUSION

School Governing Bodies' have a statutory responsibility and were awarded many critical functions within schools which could make a valuable contribution to ensuring a school's effectiveness and continuing improvement. The State furtively amended the SASA which in effect decimated the SGB's power. The new education system encourages community participation. However, bureaucrats very often do not necessarily adhere to tenets of democracy as emphasised in the South African Constitution and the SASA. Dieltiens [41] points out that, deliberate democrats justify democracy as a process where everyone participates in the policy-making process. The challenge for participatory democracy is when the individuals and groups have conflicting value systems and political agendas. It

is important to keep sight of the fact that parents are volunteers. They are often highly motivated, but the trend of government to diminish original responsibilities and decision-making which SGBs possessed has led to disillusionment. The school governance model is structured for representative democracy through the triannual electoral process and inclusion of relevant role-players. Although the SGBs participation in school affairs is far reaching it falls short in terms of the full participation in the allocated functions. In principle, governance partnerships lay a foundation for democracy. Effective participation and functionality is dependent on SGBs possessing the power to debate, argue and compromise which will result in decisiveness and accountability and ultimately Homeostasis will be achieved between SGBs and the State. In this regard Karlsson [22] explains that SGBs are the structures through which parents, educators, non-educators and learners (in secondary schools) can guarantee that the main objective of a school is realised, which is, that the child receives quality education.

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