

## Decision-making within Rural Secondary School Governing Bodies in Mpumalanga Province

S. J. Mohapi

*College of Education, University of South Africa  
E-mail: mohapsj@unisa.ac.za*

**KEYWORDS** Rural Secondary School. Democratic. South African Schools Act. Model C Schools

**ABSTRACT** The paper explores how rural secondary school governing bodies (SGBs) in the Nkangala education district in Mpumalanga province take decisions to determine if the process is in line with the South African Schools Act (SASA). The respondents were from three rural SGBs. Each SGB in the three schools had eleven members (33n). The respondents responded to an open-ended questionnaire. Subsequent to the open-ended questionnaire, the researcher attended SGBs meetings as a non-participant observer. Data was gathered by means of socio-grams and an analysis of the decision-making process. The findings in the study are that the majority of decisions taken by the sample schools are not in line with SASA. Only one meeting in which all the members participated resulted in a democratic decision. Although a majority decision was taken in one of the schools, the parents did not participate in the debate; they only nodded their heads in support of the proposals of the principal who was the chairperson of the meeting. The findings of this study revealed that the rural secondary SGBs in the three schools did not operate in accordance with SASA which endowed them with powers to participate in the decision-making process during meetings.

### INTRODUCTION

Prior to the attainment of democracy in South Africa, school governance was different from the present democratic expectations. The manner in which schools serving White communities were governed differed from the schools serving Black communities, for example, in most schools serving the white communities, statutory parent bodies were established which had a wide range of decision-making powers; as a result, the former Model C schools tended to operate more democratically than the rural schools where many parents were uninvolved in school governance (Mncube 2007). Following the 1994 democratic election, a non-racial education system based on democratic principles was instituted. SGBs were ushered by the new political and educational dispensation in South Africa. The ideal of democratisation in all spheres of life was of key importance; this was vision implied that stakeholders in SGBs participated in meetings. Decision-making by full participation in school governance meant a total break away from the erstwhile apartheid education regime bringing a sense of ownership and acceptability to local communities (SACE 1996). According to Simkins (2000), a policy framework was established in England and Wales under the Education Reform Act of 1988. Under these arrangements, school governing bodies have

been granted considerable powers to manage their own affairs. In South Africa as well the introduction of SGBs was aimed at encouraging stakeholders to participate in school affairs; which also meant that parents, regardless of their level of education, were expected to make their voices heard during meetings. In terms of SASA, the introduction of SGBs in schools meant that the power had been devolved to SGBs. If the SGBs do not have the real power to take decisions that will affect the direction of the school, democratisation will only be an illusion and participative governance an empty promise. Allocating power to SGBs implies that the SGB members are able and willing to take decisions that are made in the spirit of true democracy. Mncube (2010) argued that the parents at some rural schools were reluctant to participate in the decision-making as a result of their low educational level or power struggles in SGBs.

Similarly, in international literature, Dinham and Scott (2000) alleged that the 1980's was characterised by "a rush of simultaneous reconstruction in many countries around the world in an effort to improve teaching outcomes and learner performance." They further reported that these reconstructions did not begin as curricular changes, but quickly honed in on the control and governance in schools. It is mentioned internationally that the partnership between parents, local authorities, the local community and

teachers has changed over time. These changes have made individual schools and their governors more powerful (www.durham.gov.uk). From national and international perspective, SGBs are expected to be enthusiastic and committed to wanting children to get the best from their schools; be discreet, open minded and fair; willing to raise questions constructively; and participate in discussions and decision-making. (www.essex.gov.uk).

This paper argues that undemocratic governance in rural schools in South Africa will remain a challenge unless parents in rural SGBs participate in the decision-making process. Following the model used by Bannink and Ossewaarde (2012), the researcher aspired to examine how parents in rural SGBs make decisions by classifying these decisions into centralised and decentralised decisions.

The paper comprises seven sections: the introduction; the definition of concepts; the theoretical framework in which the researcher discusses theories about decisions as understood by Kozine (2004); the methodology whereby the process of data collection is outlined; the findings; a discussion of the findings; and the recommendation and conclusion.

### **Historical Background**

Prior to the democratic government in South Africa, the provinces had different educational policies, but all the schools in a specific province followed the same syllabus and wrote the same public examination. Schools were not equally resourced, others received more money while others received low budget. Some provinces insisted on single-medium education; either English or Afrikaans and some of them allowed dual or parallel medium schools. Education in the different provinces was centralised under the Department of Bantu Education, the government then established homelands; and when these homelands became independent, control of education was given to them. In 1990 Nelson Mandela and other political leaders were released. Democracy started to become politically correct. Government was thinking of giving the parents a say in the schools; and decided to hold referendums at each school. Four models were presented to the parents, namely Model A, B, C, and D. If a majority of 90% of the parents in a school, in an 80% poll, decided to adopt a

specific model, they could have it implemented. Model A was basically the status quo. Model B was similar, except that the school could decide on its own admission policy; which meant that the governing body of the school could decide on how many children to admit. Model C schools were private schools that controlled their own admission policy and they were responsible for maintaining all the buildings and the property. There would be a subsidy for teachers; but not to cover the entire maintenance. Model D was basically one for special needs. In some of the posh suburbs, the richer parents were attracted to Model C which seemed to be the cheapest way of obtaining private schools (Van Wyk 1998). A number of parents held consultative meetings to discuss ways in which Model C could be resisted, but they could not succeed.

### ***South African Schools' Act***

One thorny issue in South Africa before 1990 was the involvement of parents through representatives of school governing bodies. McPherson cited by Mncube (2007), indicated that the functioning of SGBs varied from school to school and that the former model C schools tended to operate more democratically. In rural schools, many parents have no prior experience of school governance which poses a challenge to the rural secondary SGBs with regard the decision-making process as their responsibility. The introduction of the South African Schools' Act (SASA) 84 of 1996 was a way of democratising South African schools and giving SGBs powers to govern. The Act further indicates that stakeholders in education, especially those close to the schools, must accept responsibility for their schools' affairs and strive towards involving each SGB stakeholder in the decision-making process.

SASA section 16 is very explicit in stating that the management tasks to be undertaken by school principals refer to aspects such as line function duties and policy implementation; while governance duties should be allocated to the SGBs. Among other functions, the SGBs should decide on an admission policy for the school; the religious practices to be followed at the school; the uniform and language policy of the school within the framework laid down in the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) of 1996 and SASA; the development of the mission

statement; the adoption of a code of conduct for learners; and the budget of the school.

Mncube (2008) confirms the above when he stating the following:

*“In South Africa, school governance refers to the institutional structure entrusted with the responsibility or authority to formulate and adopt school policy on a range of issues which include school uniforms; school budgets and developmental priorities; endorsement of the code of conduct for learners”.*

These functions show the important role of the SGBs and the link they form between the school and the community they serve. Various studies have been conducted on SGBs in South Africa (Van Wyk 1998; Mncube 2005; Karisson 2002; Heystek 2004). However, little research has been conducted to show how the ideals of democracy can be realised at grassroots level where parents take decisions, because they represent the majority in the SGB. This paper aims at closing this gap.

### **Concepts Used in the Study**

#### ***School Governing Body***

A body established in terms of SASA which has a governance responsibility in every school in South Africa. The SGBs consist of parents, learners and teachers in secondary schools (Van Wyk 1998) and each member's voice should be heard during the decision-making process.

#### ***Socio-gram***

A graphic representation of a person's social links. In this paper, socio-grams are used as a graph drawn to plot decisions taken by the SGBs of the three sample schools.

#### ***Decision-making***

According to Furby and Beyth-Marom (1992), decision making is the process of selecting a logical choice. For the purpose of this paper, decision-making is based on the premise that SGBs are provided with opportunities to explore ways in making their voices heard.

*Democratic Decision:* A decision taken by considering the views of the majority. For the purpose of this study, democratic decision implies that all the SGB members are included equal-

ly in the decision-making process and the decisions would be considered as legitimate by everybody concerned.

*Majority Decision:* A decision that selects alternatives which have a majority.

*Consensus Decision:* A group process that seeks the consent, not necessarily the agreement of participants to the solution of objectives.

*Minority Decision:* When a few people decide on the matter under discussion without consulting other members.

*Lack of Response Decision:* When members keep quiet and do not participate in the decision-making process. They have either not been informed about the matter under discussion or they have decided not to participate in the decision-making process at all.

*Authoritative Decision:* A decision characterised by highly concentrated and centralised power.

*Unanimous Decision:* A decision taken when all the members agree without opposition after evaluating the alternatives.

This paper looks at seven types of decisions identified by Rosenbaum (1996) namely, democratic, majority, minority, unanimous, lack of response, consensus, and authoritative decisions. These types of decisions are used as a basis for establishing the decisions taken by rural SGBs. It may be that the majority of important decisions are made through a process of consultation, but it may also be that decisions are left to one or more informed members of the SGBs. If the latter is true, it may imply that democratically established SGBs are functioning in a very undemocratic fashion which will defeat the purpose and the intent of the SGBs; and is not in accordance with SASA.

### **Theoretical Framework**

Kozine (2004) distinguished between conventional and non-conventional theories of decision-making. For the purpose of this article, non-conventional theories of decision-making may serve as a basis to understand how rural secondary SGBs make decisions. According to non-conventional theories of decision-making, human activities should be guided and aimed at preventing damage to the environment. The principle of precautionary action in these theories is introduced as a means of dealing with uncer-

tainty and ignorance in decision-making. This principle can be used in the study to shed light on the parents' ignorance of their responsibility of taking decisions. The principle further encourages flexibility and robust discussions during meetings to arrive at sound decisions. One proponent of the theory, Bayesianism (Kozine 2004), emphasised the quantity and quality of information the decision-maker must have as an important factor when making a decision. Sometimes SGBs in rural secondary schools are called urgently to adjudicate on a matter without receiving information.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Design

The study adopts quantitative and qualitative approaches. Many writings about mixed methods have focused on the use of component designs (parallel and sequential) in which the different elements are kept separate, thus, allowing each element to be true to its own design (Creswell 1994; Morse 1991; Morgan 1998). We hope to achieve this in the paper in order to answer the following research question:

How can democratic decision-making contribute to effective school governance?

### Data Collection

Two data collection instruments were used. Thirty-three SGB members completed an open-

ended questionnaire in which they indicated their level of education; their experience as members of the SGB; and the number of planned and urgent meetings they attended. Qualitative data was collected during SGB meetings where the researcher was a non-participant observer.

### Sampling

The sampling was purposive comprising three rural secondary schools from the Nkangala education district in Mpumalanga province. Secondary schools were selected, because all the stakeholders are represented in the SGB – the learners, parents, teachers, school management and support staff. After the regional director had given written permission for the three schools to participate in the study, the researcher arranged to make a presentation on the purpose of the study to the affected members of the SGB. The schools remained anonymous and were labelled A, B and C; and the 33 SGB members from the three schools also remained anonymous.

## DATA ANALYSIS

Graphic representations were used in Figures 1-4 to analyse the open-ended questionnaires:

Figure 1 shows the educational level of SGB members in the three schools, starting from below grade 5 to grade 12 and above.

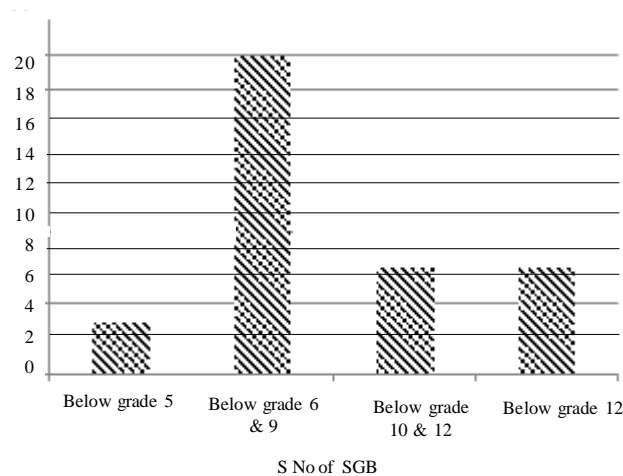
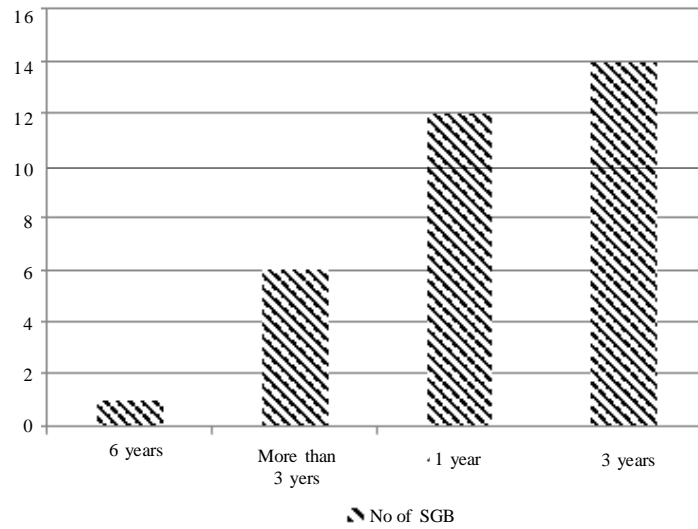
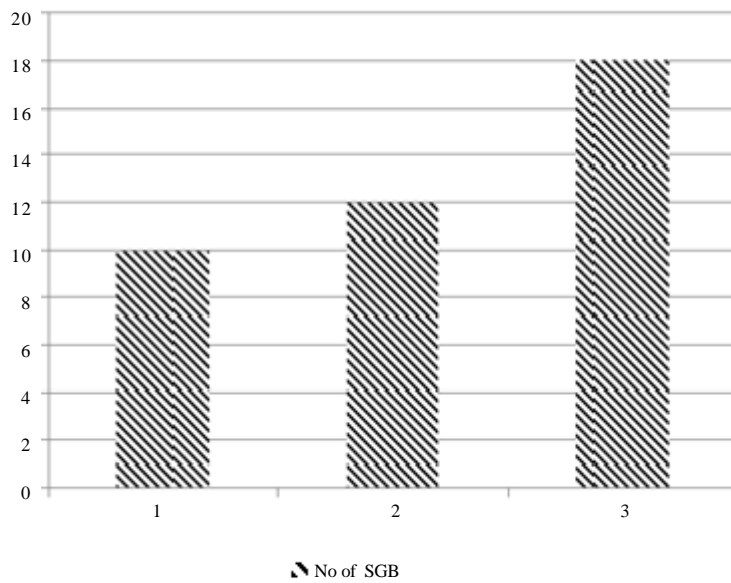


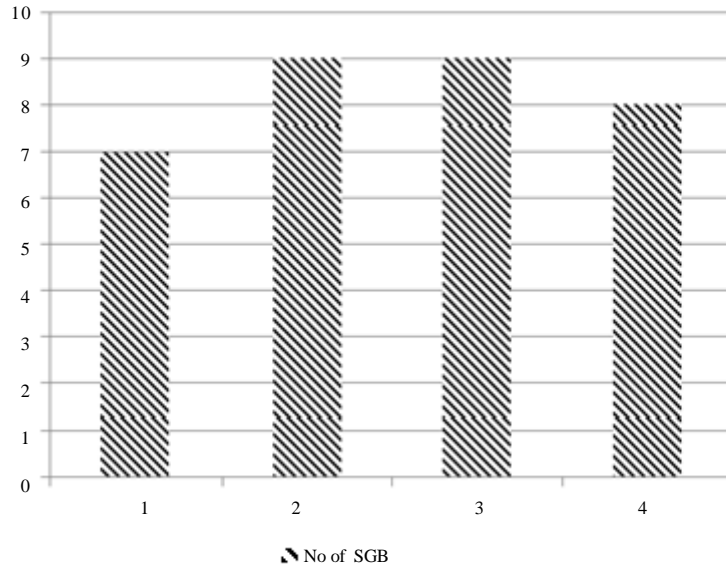
Fig. 1. Educational level of SGBs



**Fig. 2. Individual’s experience as a serving SGB member, not necessarily in the same school**



**Fig. 3. Meeting attendance – planned meetings**



**Fig. 4. Meeting attendance– urgent meetings**

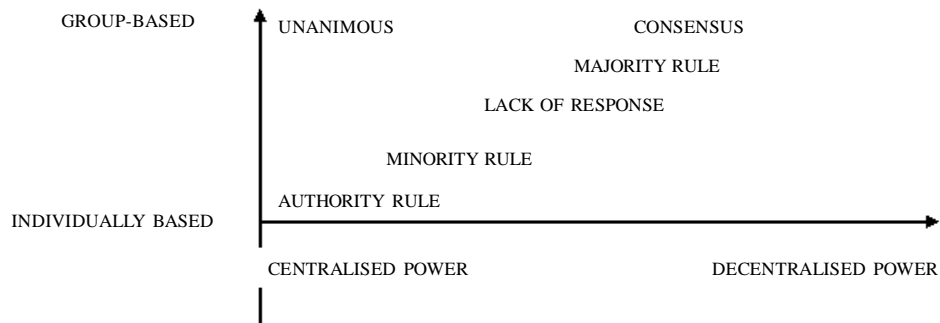
In terms of SASA, there are four planned meetings for SGBs annually; Figure 3 represents the attendance of these meetings by the sample SGBs.

The principals sometimes call the SGBs for urgent meetings, especially the chairperson and treasurer. Urgent meetings attended by the sample SGB members are represented in Figure 4.

With regard to data collected through observation, the researcher used model used by Bannink; Ossewaarde (2012), where they used

vertical and horizontal axis; centralised and decentralised to show policy autonomy and implementation discretion. In this paper the researcher used the model to classify decisions on power and group involvement in an attempt to understand how rural SGBs take decisions.

Figure 5 draws a distinction between two sets of variables to be taken into account when classifying decisions. On the horizontal axis, the location of power (whether centralised or decentralised) is indicated. Power refers to the in-



**Fig. 5. Classification of decisions based on power and group involvement**

fluence one person has over others in getting them to do what he/she wishes them to do. Power may be centralised in one or more individuals based on their position, expert knowledge or potential sphere of influence. The more power is centralised in one or more individuals the more likely it is that decisions will be dominated by them. The vertical axis distinguishes between the individual and the group. The more role players are involved in the decisions to be taken the better the chances that the decisions will be accepted and supported by the majority of people. Based on the outline above, the decisions taken during SGBs meetings were plotted according to their power/people involvement relationships. The decisions were analysed by means of socio-grams. The following symbols were used as indication of what was said during the meetings:

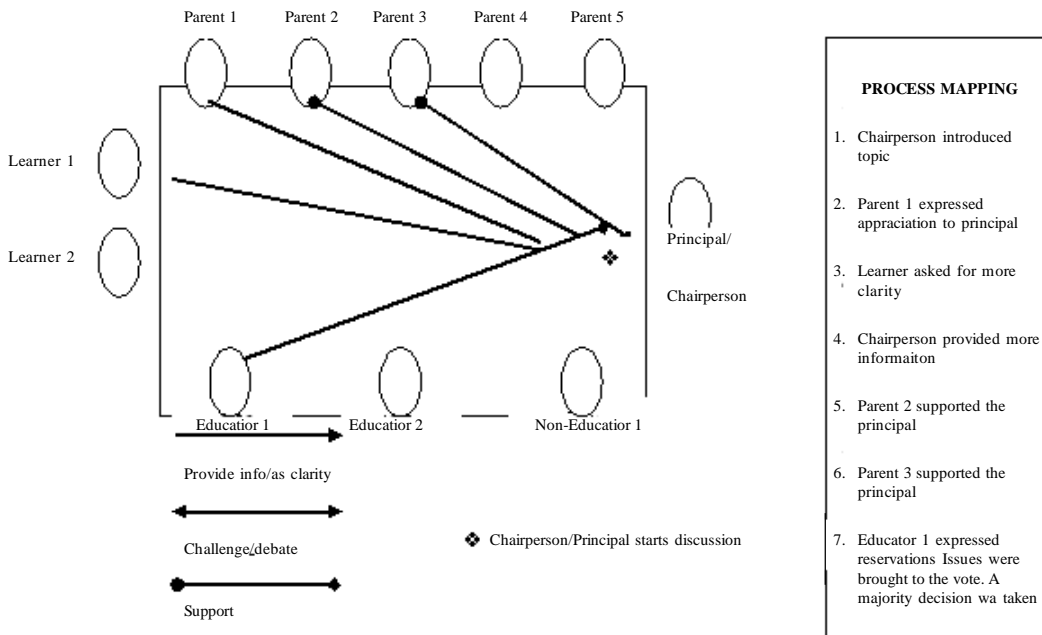
Chairperson starts the discussion.

- Provides information and asks for clarity
- ← Challenges the decision and starts the debate:
- Supports the motion

**RESULTS**

The findings from the open-ended questionnaires were as follows: *the educational level of SGBs*: three members of the SGB had qualifications lower than grade 5, 18 were between grade 6–9, six members were between grade 10–12 and another six of them were above grade 12; *the experience of SGBs*: One member served for than six years on the, ten members served for more than three years, 12 members served for one year – the majority in this category are teachers and learners; *the attendance of planned meetings*: 12 members of the SGB attended two meetings while 18 members attended one meeting and ten attended three meetings; *the attendance of urgent meetings*: differed from the planned meetings, eight SGB members attended four meetings, nine attended two meetings, another nine attended three meetings, and seven attended one meeting.

Qualitative data was analysed through socio-grams; decisions needed to be taken regarding security, the use of drugs, the wearing of school uniform and an increase in school fees. The following SGB members attended all the meetings: The principal; the chairperson; five parents, (among whom a treasurer); two teach-



**Fig. 6. Decision 1- Improving the security at the school**

ers (one of whom acted as secretary); and two learners. There were thirty three members who attended all the meetings, eleven from each SGB.

With regard to a decision that needed to be taken on the security at school A, the principal provided information and said that the buildings had been vandalised during the school holidays and extensive damage had been done. Figure 6 illustrates the mapping of the communication at the meetings.

**Analysis of Decision: Improving Security (School A)**

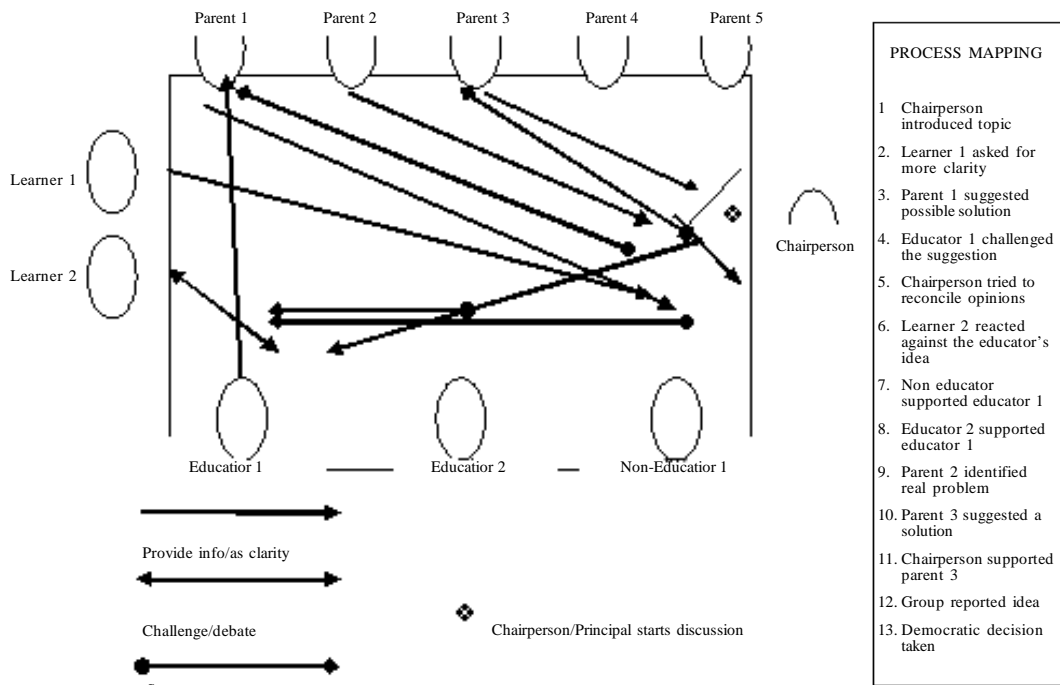
The communication flow indicated in Figure 6 reflects a situation where there was little interaction between the various members who attended the SGB meeting. They did not explore alternatives, but accepted the information provided by the principal who was also the chairperson of the meeting. Reservations by group members were not discussed in detail and even though the final decision was put to the vote, it resulted in a majority decision. The lack of interaction and interrogation of ideas provides evi-

dence of strong elements of authoritarian and minority decision-making.

At the same meeting, a decision had to be taken regarding the use of drugs on the school premises. The principal mentioned that after lunch the boys became arrogant especially when the teachers wanted to discipline them for coming late. Some of them smelled of dagga which is a prohibited drug in South African schools. The SGBs wanted to restore order and discipline. Figure 7 illustrates the mapping of the communication at the meeting.

**Analysis of Decision: Coping With Drug Problem (School A)**

The communication flow indicated in Figure 7 reflects a much higher level of interaction and discussion than the previous example (Fig. 6). Alternative solutions were proposed and discussed. Very few members did not participate and the parents; and the educators suggested possible solutions. The debate assisted the group in reaching a democratic decision.



**Fig. 7. Decision 2 - Coping with the drug problem experienced by the school**



At school B a decision needed to be taken regarding the wearing of uniforms at the school. After the chairperson remarked on the matter, it was noted that some parents raised concerns that it was expensive for them to travel to town to go and buy school uniforms. Figure 8 illustrates the mapping of the communication at the meeting.

**Analysis of the Decision:-Improving the Wearing of School Uniforms (School B)**

The communication flow indicated in Figure 8 reflects a situation where information was given rather than of interaction and discussion. Five members were actively involved in giving information and no alternative solutions were proposed.

A minority decision was taken based on the information provided by experts, namely an educator and the principal. This decision-making process cannot be classified as truly democratic.

At the same meeting a decision needed to be taken regarding an increase in the school funds

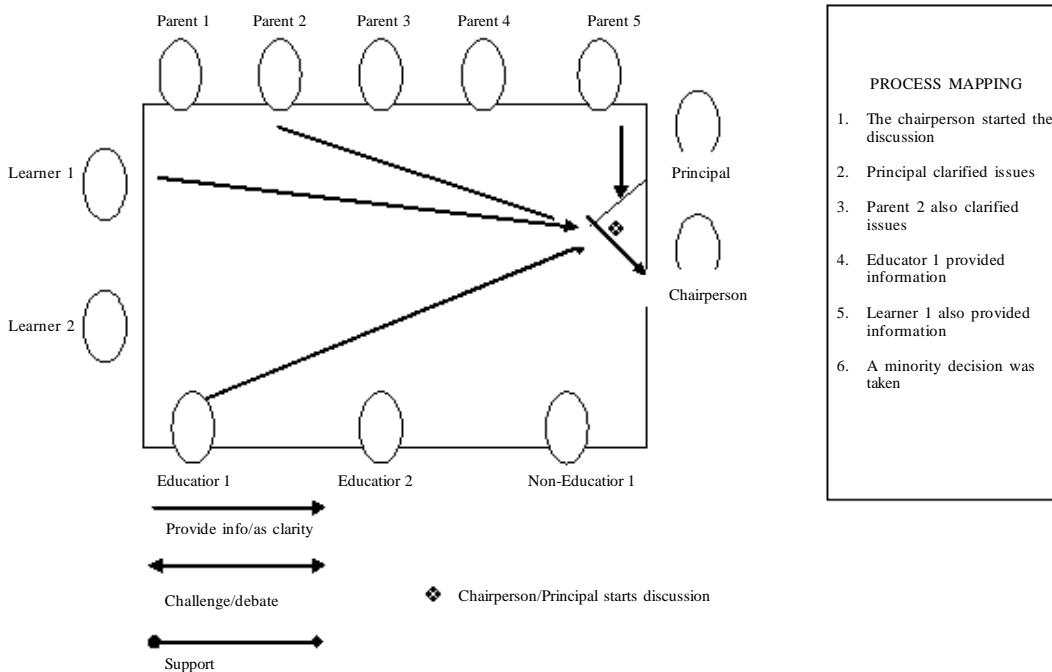
the following year. Members of the SGB wanted to find out if it was necessary to look at the needs of the school and how many parents could afford the new amount. Figure 9 illustrates the mapping of the communication at the meeting.

**Analysis of Decision: Increase in School Fund (School B)**

The communication flow indicated in Figure 9 reflects much more interaction and discussion. Alternative solutions were proposed and discussed and almost all the members had a say in the decision that was taken. A consensus decision was taken through debate and the evaluation of given alternatives.

A decision needed to be taken regarding late admission of learners at school C. The principal indicated that the closing date of admission for the school was in September each year, but in the following year there were always learners who registered late, either due to the ignorance of parents or learners claiming that they did not have uniforms.

Figure 10 illustrates the mapping of the communication at the meeting.



**Fig. 8. Decision 3 - Improving on wearing uniform at the school**

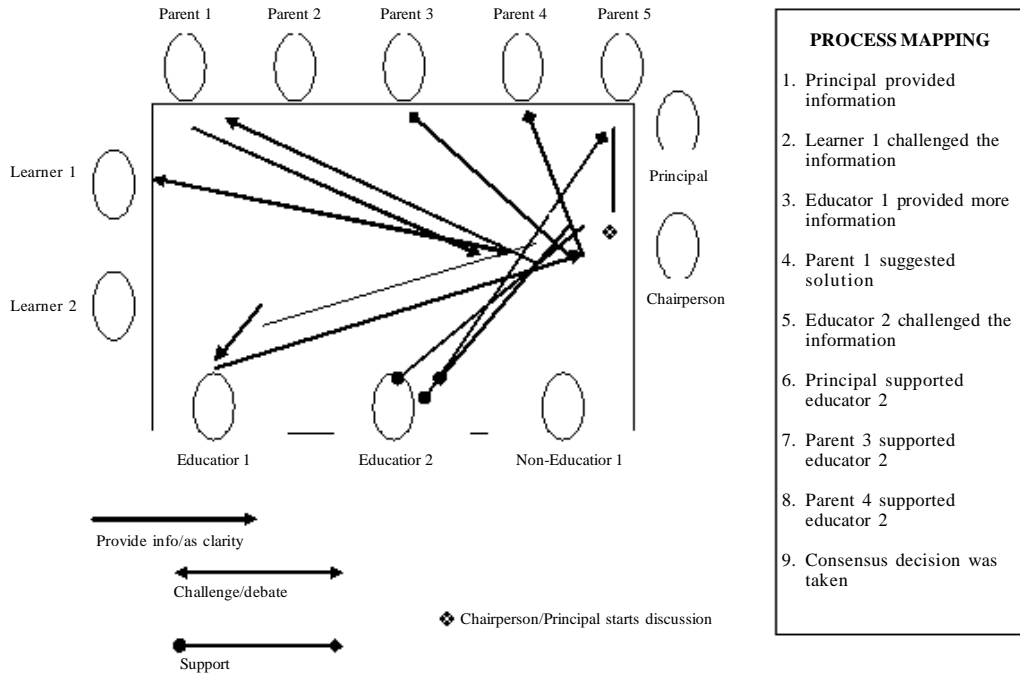


Fig. 9. Decision 4 - Dealing with the problem of school-fund increase at the school

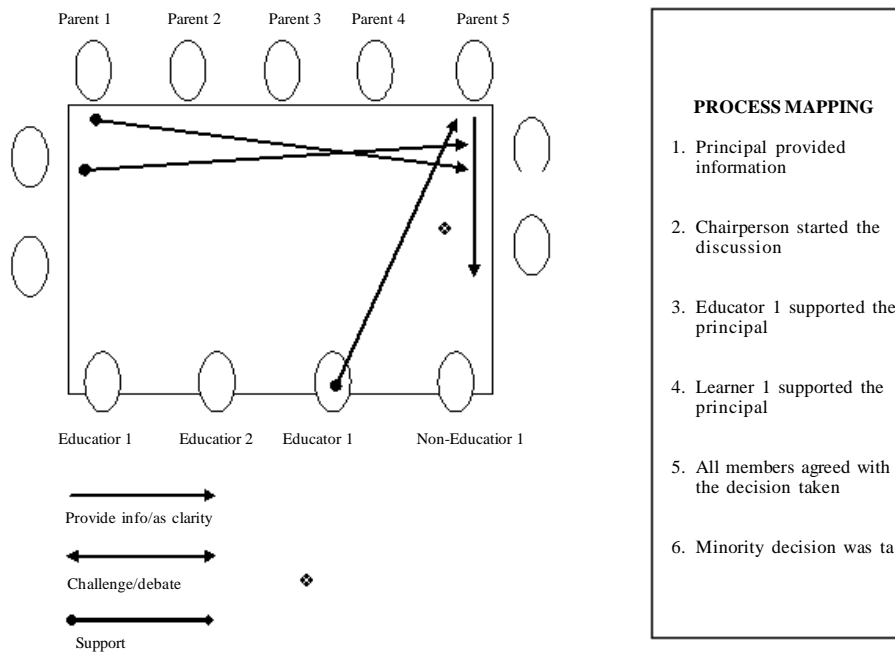


Fig. 10. Decision 5 – attending to the problem of admission at the school

### **Analysis of the Decision: Admission at School C**

The communication flow indicated in Figure 10 reflects a situation where there was little interaction among the various members who attended the meeting. The information provided was sufficient to explain the problem and the members were well aware of the impact of the problem. The members of the SGB did not explore alternatives as they agreed and accepted the information provided. Minority decision was taken.

### **DISCUSSION**

The data that emerged from the open-ended questionnaires were analysed, the study established that the educational level of the majority of school governing bodies was between grade 7-10, principals and teachers had qualifications above grade 12 and learners were doing grade 11 at the time of the study. The educational level might pose a challenge to effective decision-making where certain members of SGBs would find it difficult to follow the line of argument and debate during meetings. Regardless of the number of years serving in the SGBs, some sample SGBs members did not attend all the planned meetings, and in most instances the principals called urgent meetings with the chairperson and treasurer, which compromised the democratic decision-making process, since not all members were part of urgent meetings. The study concluded by noting that members who had the privilege of attending urgent meetings seemed to be informed and they supported the principals during the meetings. The study revealed that the decisions taken during SGB meetings were not democratic in nature. Even though a majority decision was taken to a certain point, the parent component of SGB did not participate fully; they only supported what the principal said without questioning him. During all the meetings, the researcher observed that only one democratic decision was taken. It was also noted that the learners and educators questioned the principal who acted as chairperson, while the parent component kept quiet and participated only when they were asked to vote. At a certain point they supported what was said by nodding their heads. From the discussion, it seems that the

parent components of the SGBs from the three schools were reluctant to participate in the decision-making which is their responsibility in terms of SASA; they thus shifted their responsibility onto the principals, teachers and learners.

Based on what emerged from the findings, rural secondary SGBs in the three schools are not operating in accordance with SASA.

### **CONCLUSION**

This paper has sought to explore how democratic decision-making can contribute to effective school governance. Decision-making in the three schools may be enhanced by the involvement of all the members of the SGB, especially the parent component, because they are in the majority. The findings provided evidence that rural SGBs take undemocratic decisions which are not in accordance with SASA. The types of decisions taken in the meetings do not contribute towards effective school governance, because not all the members participated effectively in the meetings. According to the findings, it is essential that rural secondary SGBs be provided with information and understanding required to make decisions. The lack of response and minority decisions may imply that SGBs were not informed about the issues discussed during the meetings, possibly because the SGBs were called urgently for unplanned meetings. The educational level of some members of the SGBs might contribute towards non-participation in the meetings.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

The primary recommendation in this paper is that SGBs should be encouraged to take ownership of their schools and move beyond mere political representation. Universities should consider offering short courses to all South African SGBs. They should also be provided with enough information and be experienced in interpreting it. It may happen that SGBs are not given enough quality information prior the meetings; this might lead to minority decisions during meetings. Drawing on the findings in the research question above, the researcher inferred that there must be certain requirements rural SGBs should consider in order to participate in the decision-

ing process during meetings. Sufficient information before the meetings and the understanding of the matters under discussion could have a marked effect on the manner in which SGBs make decisions.

### REFERENCES

- Bannink D, Ossewaarde R 2012. Administration and Society, 44 (5): 595-624. From <<http://aas.sagepub.com>> (Retrieved on the 6 August 2013).
- Carter C, Harber C, Serf J 2003. *Towards Ubuntu Critical Teacher Education for Democratic Citizenship in South Africa*. Birmingham: Development Centre.
- Creswell JW 1994. *Research Design: Qualitative and Quantitative Approaches*. Thousands Oaks CA: Sage.
- Dinham S, Scott C 2000. Teachers' Work and the Growing Influence of Societal Expectations and Pressures. *Paper Presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association*, New Orleans, 26 April.
- Esp D, Saran E 1995. *Effective Governors for Effective Schools, Roles and Relationships*. London: Pitman Publishing.
- Francis G, Castles DJ, Murray DJ, Potter DC 1971. *Decisions, Organizations and Society*. New York: Penguin Books.
- Furby L, Beyth-Marom R 1992: Risk taking in adolescence: A decision-making perspective. *Developmental Review*, 12: 1-44.
- Gall MG, Borg WR, Gall JP 1996. *Educational Research: An Introduction*. 6<sup>th</sup> Edition. White Plains, Ny: Longman.
- Heystek J 2004. School governing bodies: The principal's burden in the light of his/her life? *South Africa Journal of Education*, 24: 38-312.
- Karrison J 2002. The role of democratic governing bodies in South African schools. *Comparative Education*, 22: 326-331.
- Kozine I 2004. A Survey of Decision Making Theories. From <<http://www.metropolis-network.net>> (Retrieved on 6 July 2013).
- Mncube VS 2005. *School Governance in the Democratisation of Education in South Africa: The Interplay between Policy and Practice*. PhD Thesis. University of Birmingham.
- Mncube VS 2007. Social justice, policy and parents' understanding of their voice in school governing bodies in South Africa. *Journal of Educational Administration and History*, 39: 129-143.
- Mncube VS 2008. Democratization of education in South Africa: Issues of social justice and the voice of learners. *South African Journal of Education*, 28: 77-90.
- Morgan DL 1998. Practical strategies for combining qualitative and quantitative methods, applications to health research. *Quantitative Health Research*, 8(3): 362-376.
- Morse JM 1991. Approaches to Qualitative and Quantitative Methodological Triangulation. *Nursing Research* 40:120-1123. From <[www.pietbadenhorst.co.za/danalysis.html](http://www.pietbadenhorst.co.za/danalysis.html)> (Retrieved on 12 June 2013).
- Rosenbaum D 1997. *Promoting the Culture of Learning and Teaching*. Canada: McGill University.
- Simkins T 2000. Education reform and managerialism: Comparing the experience of schools and colleges. *Journal of Education Policy*, 15(3): 3-47.
- Sipamla S 1995. *Participatory Decision-making to Democratic School Governance*. MA Dissertation. Cape Town: University of Western Cape.
- South African Council of Educators 1996. *Annual Report*. Centurion.
- South Africa Department of Education 1996a. *South African Schools Act*. Pretoria: Government Printer.
- South Africa Department of Education 1996b. *National Education Policy*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa Department of Education 1997. *First Steps: Governance Starter Pack*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- South Africa Department of Education 2004. *White Paper on Organization - Governance and Funding*. Pretoria: Government Printers.
- Van Wyk N 2004. School Governing Bodies: The experiences of South African educators. *South African Journal of Education*, 34: 49-54.
- Van Wyk N 1998. Organization of governance of education in South Africa. In: F Pretorius, E Lemmer (Eds.): *South African Education and Transition in a Democratic Era*. Johannesburg: Hadder and Stoughton.