

Constraints to Effective Governance by the Parent Component of the SGBs in Rural South Africa

Vangeli Wiseman Gamede

University of KwaZulu-Natal, Pietermaritzburg, South Africa, 3201
E-mail: gamede@ukzn.ac.za

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ABSTRACT The South African Schools Act, No.84 of 1996, pronounces the establishment of School Governing Bodies, which permits stakeholders such as parents, educators and learners to play an active role in taking decisions concerning the running of the school. School governance in rural South Africa has found itself confronted with a myriad of problems, which have rendered it both ineffective and, in some instances, unsuccessful. This paper explores and analyses the constraints facing the parent component of the School Governing Bodies in rural South Africa. A qualitative research method, using the convenience sampling strategy and interviews, was adopted by engaging chairpersons of the School Governing Bodies in certain selected high schools of the Sisonke district in KwaZulu-Natal. The results of the empirical investigation revealed that the School Governing Bodies in rural South Africa are confronted with challenges pertaining mainly to the literacy level of the parent component, the parents' lack of understanding of their roles and responsibilities and the lack of financial muscle, for parents' easy movement between the school and home

INTRODUCTION

One of the main characteristics of educational reforms around the world has always been the decentralisation of education governance to the local school level (Tsotetsi et al. 2008; Edwards and DeMatthews 2014). The concept of decentralisation itself emanates from the belief that government alone cannot successfully have control over the schools, and that it needs to engage other stakeholders, particularly those closer to the school, on a partnership basis (Van Wyk 2007). Decentralisation allows school stakeholders to participate at a level in which they can have a direct impact on matters that concern them (Chisholm et al. 2003; Mwinjuma et al. 2015). According to Mabasa and Themane (2002), when government, schools and communities collaborate in making important decisions about educational matters, a true mutual responsibility will grow.

The dawn of democracy in South Africa, epitomised by the elections of the 27th of April 1994, marked the formal end of apartheid rule and ushered in a new South African Constitution with a

commitment to a representative and participatory democracy, accountability, transparency and public involvement (Naidoo 2005). Concerning education, the constitution provided a legislation, the South African Schools Act No.84 of 1996 (SASA). The SASA aimed at creating a new government landscape premised on citizen participation, partnership between the state, school personnel, learners, parents and communities (Republic of South Africa 1996). The act provides for the election of School Governing Bodies (SGBs), constituted by the school personnel, learners (in the case of high schools) and parents. It grants the schools and their constituencies a significant say in decision making processes concerning school governance.

Two decades have elapsed since the promulgation of the SASA, yet school governance in South Africa, particularly in rural areas, seems to experience a myriad of challenges. In spite of some intervention strategies aimed at capacity building of the school governors, studies are teeming with observations of copious challenges facing the SGBs in South Africa (Heystek 2004; Dieltiens 2005; Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004; Brown and Duku 2008; Xaba 2011; Mavuso and Duku 2014).

Research Objective

The objective of this paper was to investigate the school governance constraints faced

Address for correspondence:
Vangeli Wiseman Gamede
University of KwaZulu-Natal
Private Bag X1, Scottsville
Room 33 Commerce Building
Pietermaritzburg, 3201, South Africa

by the parent component of the SGBs in rural South Africa. To achieve this objective, perceptions of SGB chairpersons from selected rural areas in South Africa were sought. These perceptions revolved around the challenges the parents in the SGBs faced regarding the execution of their governance functions as expounded in the SASA.

Conceptual Framework of School Governance

For this paper, school governance is conceptualised by school governance roles and functions as delineated in the SASA. The promulgation of the Act was aimed at contributing to efficiency, greater equity and improved parental participation that would, in turn, lead to an enhanced culture of learning and teaching (Mavuso and Duku 2014). By the Act, the functions of the SGB are clearly stipulated. One of the responsibilities of the SGB is, among other things, to promote the best interests of the school by providing quality education for all learners. According to Squelch (2001), the SGB, standing in a position of trust towards the school, has a duty to act in good faith and not engage in any unlawful conduct or behaviour that may jeopardise the interests of the school. The Act also prescribes that it is the responsibility of the SGB to adopt a constitution for its school; a mission statement that sets out the goals and shared values of the school and the code of conduct for learners at the school.

Furthermore, the SASA stipulates that it is the duty of the SGB to support the principal, educators and other staff members of the school in the day-to-day execution of their professional functions. In terms of the Act, it is also the responsibility of the SGB to administer and control school property, buildings and grounds occupied and used by the school. The Act also specifies that the SGB should determine the extra-curricular activities of the school and be fully involved in the procurement of the Learner and Teacher Support Materials (LTSM) and non-LTSM. The procurement task is in keeping with the prescription of the Act which stipulates that the governing body has full responsibility for managing the finances of the school, such as the establishment of a school fund; the preparation of an annual budget; the collection and administering of school fees; the keeping of financial records; the appointment of an accountant

and supplementing the school's physical resources (Republic of South Africa 1996).

The roles and responsibilities of the SGB that are highlighted above dictate that the SGB members should be highly skilled and competent to execute effectively and successfully. This requirement poses a huge challenge to the parent component of the SGB, especially in rural areas, as many of them are illiterate and therefore find it difficult to comprehend the prescripts of the Act.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Setting

The site for this research was the Harry Gwala District of KwaZulu-Natal, which is teeming with historically disadvantaged rural schools. Sixteen high schools from Umzimkulu, a circuit within the district, were used as the population of interest. This site was chosen because it is a true representative of rural South Africa.

Participant Selection

The selection of the participants in this research was both purposeful and dimensional. This enabled the researcher to focus on those variables in the population that are of interest to the investigation (Strydom and Venter 2002). Landsverk et al. (2012) define a purposeful sampling technique as the method that is widely used in qualitative research for the identification and the selection of information-rich cases related to the phenomenon of interest. On its part, dimensional participant selection entails the selection of only a few cases to be studied in depth and ensures that each population stratum is represented (Strydom and Venter 2002). In this research, purposeful and dimensional participant selection consisted of the chairpersons of the SGBs in the sixteen schools that were identified as the population of interest.

Research Design

The researcher pursued a qualitative research approach. This research method was adopted because it is a research approach in which researchers attempt to comprehend the meaning which people attach to their experiences or phenomenon within their society (Richie and Lewis

2003). The research method was also selected because it facilitated entry into participants' life-world to explore their practical experiences. Of critical importance, this research method contends that knowledge is subjective and ideographic and truth is context dependent, which can only be obtained after entry into participants' reality (Brown and Duku 2008).

Data Collection

The researcher pursued a non-probability convenience sampling method as a means of collecting data. He used a qualitative research method with a phenomenological strategy. The purpose of adopting this method was to unearth discernments displayed by the parent component of the SGBs in rural South Africa. According to Bogdan and Biklen (2003), this research approach empowers one to comprehend human behaviour and experience better. This method further enables one to focus on that which takes place within their natural environment and the degree of its intricacy and to attain an in-depth comprehension of how participants view things (Gay and Airsian 2003). A qualitative research design further accords the researcher an opportunity to avail themselves in the research setting (Bogdan and Biklen 2003; Mackey and Gass 2016).

Research Instrument

The researcher used semi-structured one-to-one type interviews with open-ended questions as a means of gathering information. According to Plummer (2001), a structured interview is a method that is easy to administer because it allows the researcher to have a well-defined role of setting with the questionnaire in his/her lap. Semi-structured interviews are not fixed and neither are they fully free, yet they are a flexible research strategy (O'Leary 2004). This strategy was selected because it allows the researcher to probe questions, while at the same time ensuring consistency in the main questions advanced to each respondent. Furthermore, the strategy was adopted after having taken cognizance of the fact that the majority of the respondents were illiterate and could, therefore, find it difficult to respond to questions through means other than one-to-one type interviews.

The questions used in the interviews were first constructed in English, but were later translated into isiZulu, the local language of the respondents. Interviews were conducted in isiZulu and respondents were permitted to dwell on issues beyond those that were prescribed on the interviews. The direct two-way conversational communication allowed for considerable flexibility regarding the scope and depth of the interviews (Leedy and Ormrod 2005). A video recorder was used to collect data, after the participants' informed consent was obtained. Before questions about challenges faced by parents serving in rural SGBs could be posed, the respondents were asked to provide demographic information. They were asked to state the age, gender, educational level and their experience as SGB members, because all these variables have a bearing on their level of effectiveness. During the process of data collection, the participants' right to anonymity and privacy was respected.

Data Analysis

Graphic representations were used in Tables 1 to 4 to analyse the demographics of the participants

Table 1 shows that males dominate the positions of chairpersonship, 87 percent against the 13 percent of females. The significance of this variable is that from the females that are not made chairpersons of SGBs, there might be those who could be more competent than males as chairpersons.

Table 1: Gender of participants

<i>Gender</i>	<i>Frequency (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
Male	14	87
Female	2	13

Table 2 show that the majority of the SGB chairpersons is from age 41 and above. The sig-

Table 2: Age of participants

<i>Age category</i>	<i>Frequency (n)</i>	<i>Percentage (%)</i>
20-30	1	6
31-40	4	25
41-50	6	37
50 and above	5	32

nificance of this variable is that the majority of the older people in the rural areas never bothered themselves about formal education, hence the high illiteracy levels amongst them.

Table 3 illustrate that 87.5 percent of the participants are illiterate, as their highest educational qualification is Grade 6. Only a small percentage, 6.25 percent, are those that have gone as far as grade 12 and above. This variable is significant because it demonstrates the high illiteracy levels amongst SGB members in rural South Africa.

Table 3: Education levels of participants

Grades	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1-4	6	37.5
5-8	8	50
9-11	1	6.25
12 and above	1	6.25

Table 4 illustrates that the majority of the members of the SGB chairpersons have served two terms (category 4 to 7 years) as SGB members of the same or different schools. The significance of this variable is premised on the fact that it shows how short the term of office for SGBs is and the fact that before they become familiar with their responsibilities and rectify their mistakes, they have to leave the office for others.

Table 4: Experience as SGB member

Years	Frequency (n)	Percentage (%)
1-3	5	32
4-7	7	43
8 and above	4	25

The expressions used during the interviews were translated from isiZulu into English and are indicated in italics under the research findings heading. The data were gathered from in-depth interviews and observations using the documentary analysis method with the view to understanding the participants' actions and the meaning attached to their actions. According to Mouton (2005), documentary analysis entails the situation in which the reader reads and analyses important documents with the aim of understanding the participants' actions and the meaning attached to their actions. Responses were tran-

scribed and coded and then grouped according to the questions asked.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

From the analysis of data, it has emerged that the parent component of the SGBs in rural South Africa is confronted with a number of constraints, which tend to impede on their effectiveness as governors of schools. It transpired that the main challenge facing parents has to do with their levels of literacy. Table 3 shows that illiteracy levels are high among parents serving in the SGBs in rural South Africa. On the issue of literacy, one parent said:

"We, as parents, are not educated. When we have to sit in these meetings to deliberate on matters about governance and the general functioning of the schools, we always feel very inferior and small, all because our level of education is very low".

Another parent had this to say:

"It does sometimes happen that you as a parent have some ideas that you can share with others under normal circumstances. However, in front of those educated people [principal and educators], you just keep quiet. Even when you have spoken out, you have that feeling that your contribution is not taken seriously. The principal and the educators are the ones who always push for their ideas to be taken into account. This then leads to a very strained relationship between the parents on the one hand and the principal and educators on the other".

The majority of the respondents expressed the feeling that their illiteracy leads to tensions between them and the educators. As far as they are concerned, it is this situation that impedes on the proper functioning of the SGBs and therefore on the promotion of the best interests of the school. Another parent further said:

"I wonder why the Department of Education opened participation in the school governance to anybody irrespective of their level of education, because this just does not work".

Also linked to the illiteracy problem, the research results indicate that parents find it difficult to execute the very basic school governance function, that of promoting the best interests of the school. Parents find themselves unable to draw a line of distinction between governance and professional management roles. The main cause of this difficulty is the fact that some

governance and management roles overlap. One parent commented:

“Sometimes in these SGB meetings, you will have a feeling that decisions had already been taken by the principal and educators without involving us as parents”.

The high level of illiteracy or semi-literacy of the parent component of the SGB contributes to parents feeling inferior and therefore devoid of the confidence they need to make a meaningful contribution to the SGB’s effectiveness. Consequently, the parents apportion blame for the difficulty in executing governance functions on the principals and educators, who, according to them (parents), undermine and look down upon them because of their low educational levels. This is consistent with Heystek’s (2006) observation that the high illiteracy levels of parent governors render them unable to integrate and interpret legislation and policy. This, he continues, results in parents having to rely on the principal for the interpretation of educational laws and policies. According to Bagarette (2012), the high illiteracy rate and lack of skills amongst the parent members of the SGBs are a major challenge to many principals who find themselves having to interpret legislation, draw up and implement school policies on their own. Tsotetsi et al. (2008) maintain that the SGB members’ illiteracy levels, knowledge, skills and governance experience are the key determining factors for the SGBs’ successful execution of duties due by them. Also, Mncube and Mafora (2014) argue that illiteracy is one of the main impediments to parents in the SGBs executing their duties effectively.

The constituency base of the teacher component of the SGBs was cited by parents as another challenge that impedes on the SGBs’ successful execution of their duties. Some parents expressed the feeling that some educators seemed to be pushing the agendas of their constituencies (other educators), even when that was going against the best interests of the schools. One parent had this to say:

“You will observe in the SGB meetings that with teachers come their hidden agendas. Whenever we as parents voice our concerns and come with ideas as SGB members, our opinions get belittled. They then pull and push the meeting towards their targeted conclusions”.

Also about to the parents’ low level of education, one parent commented:

“During decision-making processes, we sometimes feel that we are there to endorse what educators and the principal have already decided upon. For instance, as a consequence of our illiteracy, we rely on the educators and the principal for the drawing up and implementation of the school policies”.

Another constraint facing the parents serving in the SGBs in rural South African schools relates to the issues of transparency and information dissemination. From the findings it has emanated that some principals withhold information to which the entire SGB is entitled to be exposed. One SGB chairperson said:

“You can easily observe that the principal is deliberately withholding some information from us, so that he can continue doing things in a manner that would make it difficult for us to question”.

Emanating from the research findings is also the issue of financial management. Sections 36 and 43 of the SASA (Republic of South Africa 1996) prescribe that the SGBs should manage school funds and take full responsibility to execute all the necessary financial accountability processes. The majority of the respondents were of the view that the principal is the chief accounting officer and that it is the principal’s sole responsibility to ensure that financial matters are handled properly. Some respondents expressed their concern over what they referred to as the lack of transparency on the part of certain principals when it comes to school finances. Research findings indicate that problems about financial management stretched from poor budgeting, through to failure to strike a balance between budgeted income and expenditure, to failure to follow appropriate procurement procedures. One SGB chairperson alluded to this reality when he said:

“When it comes to financial management, we have a big problem. The principal at our school is not transparent when it comes to money. All he does is to make us sign blank cheques and we don’t know what he pays using those cheques and the prices of what he pays for”.

In line with the comment made by this SGB chairperson, Bush et al. (2005) report an incident where there was mistrust between certain school governors and the principal, as a consequence of the latter’s decision, in collaboration with the treasurer (an educator), to utilise school funds for their own activities outside those bud-

geted for by the whole SGB. Bush et al. (2005) further cite illiteracy, lack of experience and training on the part of the parent component of the SGBs as contributing factors to poor financial management and accountability at schools. This state of affairs has been reverberated by Mestry (2006) and Mncube and Mafora (2014) who maintain that poor training, combined with illiteracy of the parent governors and corrupt practices from some school principals and SGB members, contribute to poor financial management at schools.

Research findings have also indicated that the parent component of the SGB finds it difficult to travel between the school and areas of residence. According to the respondents, it becomes very difficult for them to travel between the school and their homes due to financial constraints. This leads to a very poor attendance of the SGB meetings by the parent component of this structure. One SGB chairperson had this to say in this regard:

"I just wonder why the Department of Education does not provide us with money and the food allowance, if it is serious about us having to attend SGB meetings regularly. Our effectiveness as SGB members hinges on our regular attendance of SGB meetings and workshops, where we can make our sound contributions. The fact that we don't have money by which to travel between our homes and the school, is itself a contributing factor to us having difficulties to attend SGB workshops and meetings, hence the high rate of absenteeism at the SGB meetings".

From the analysis of results it became evident that the majority of SGB chairpersons are males (87%) (Table 1), and those from ages 41 and above were males (Table 2) and the most experienced ones in serving in the SGBs were males (Table 4). What transpires from these results is consistent with the African tradition and practice, where the responsibilities of leadership and authority are the sole preserve of the males, particularly older males. It is an accepted norm within African tradition to have a male figure in the leadership position. Men perceive themselves as more worthy of occupying the leadership positions than women and this conception is embedded in African tradition and is non-negotiable. In a study conducted by Brown and Duku (2008) in the rural Eastern Cape, South Africa, one female SGB member commented:

"Men always bring dignity to the organisations. People respect men, and sometimes are not challenged because they are men. That is why we always elect a man as an SGB chairperson. [We] elect a person for a chairman [position] who has already been experienced in chairing [SGB] committees. In most instances men are the experienced ones. Besides, women do not seem to be interested in becoming chairpersons [s]. Men do not have secrets. You know that sometimes women can be subjective, and take decisions by the fact that they know the child's parents or something like that".

Even though gender and experience were not raised by the respondents as challenges to their effectiveness as school governors, it appears that these are the stereotypes the Department of Education needs to address, in keeping with the prescriptions of the Constitution.

Mncube et al. (2014) observe that SGBs were functioning effectively in the schools they used for their research. This might be attributed to the environment under which those schools find themselves. Those schools in the urban areas or former Whites-only schools, tend to have literate and effective SGB members. In the rural areas, however, as this paper has observed, it is a different story. In the study conducted by Mavuso and Duku (2014), the observation was that parents in the SGBs tend to feel inferior because of their low levels of education, thereby relying on the decisions taken by the principal and the teachers in those SGBs. This observation is consistent with the findings of this paper, as this paper established that the low levels of education make the parents in the rural areas to feel inferior and therefore regard their contributions as insignificant.

CONCLUSION

The paper sought to investigate the constraints faced by the parent component of the SGBs in rural South Africa. The findings indicate that even though parents in the rural SGBs are part of school governance, they are, however, not as effective as they are supposed to be, as a consequence of some impediments. From the analysis of data and research findings, it became evident that these parents are faced with constraints about their high illiteracy levels. This, coupled with the parents' lack of governance skills, in turn result in them feeling inferior in

front of the education professionals. Furthermore, the attitude of some educators serving in the SGBs, the findings indicate, makes the parent component feel that educators are only serving the interests of their constituencies. The findings also indicate that the lack of transparency by the majority of the principals make it difficult for the parents to make a meaningful contribution to the success of the SGB operations. The findings of this paper also demonstrate that parents serving in the SGBs in rural South Africa lack financial management skills. It should be noted though that even some principals are culprits when it comes to poor financial management at schools. The findings have shown that the parents serving in the SGBs in rural South Africa have a challenge when it comes to their movement between their homes and the schools. They do not have money by which to travel, and this demotivates them from attending important SGB meetings and workshops. The accounts given by the respondents in this paper, therefore, indicate that the parent component of the SGBs in rural South Africa does not fully comprehend its roles and responsibilities. The parents' low level of education disempowers them from thorough scrutiny and understanding of the prescripts of the SASA. Consequently, they are not always accorded sufficient opportunity to take part in crucial decision-making processes that impact on the day-to-day functioning of the schools.

RECOMMENDATIONS

One of the recommendations of this paper is that the Department of Education should take serious note of the high illiteracy levels amongst parents serving in the SGBs in rural South Africa. Tertiary institutions might be engaged in trying to solve this problem, by being requested to offer short courses that would revolve around school governance. The very SASA, which stipulates the roles and responsibilities of the SGBs should possibly be translated into all the 11 official languages in the country. In addition to these, the Department of Education should consider intensifying training programmes that are purposed at improving the knowledge and skills capacity of the parent component of the SGBs. Furthermore, it needs to intensify its support to the rural SGBs by establishing dedicated governance units at district levels, so as to continu-

ously render support services to the SGBs. Seeing that financial management is so critical at schools' level, and taking cognisance of the poor financial management skills by the rural SGBs, it is imperative that the Department of Education considers having full-time financial management experts that will be based at district levels, to render financial support services to the SGBs. It is further recommended that the Department of Education considers changing the term of office of the parent component of the SGBs. A three-year period is rather too short a term for parents to be expected to master the implementation of governance functions effectively. A period of at least five years is therefore recommended to accord the parents ampler time to establish themselves and acquaint themselves with the logistics of school governance.

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