

The Role of the School Principal in the South African School Governing Body: A Case Study of Various Members' Perceptions

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ABSTRACT The school principal plays an important role in the democratic management of South African schools. He or she occupies a leadership position in South African schools and is, therefore, a key role-player in the school management process. His/her leadership role in terms of school management structures contributes to democracy in South African schools and in the wider society. Despite all this, recent research has shown that persistent power struggles arise when principals overplay their management role, specifically with regard to their contributions to school governing bodies. This study, based on qualitative research, explores various perceptions of the responsibilities of school principals by school governing body members as part of the management structure in the democratic management of South African schools.

I. INTRODUCTION

1.1 The Introduction of the South African Schools Act

The South African School Act (SASA) (RSA 1996) was introduced in 1996 and among other things it makes provision for the democratic management and governance of South African schools via democratically elected school governance structures that involve all the stakeholders in the decision-making process. The SASA (RSA 1996) stipulates that all public schools in South Africa must have democratically elected School Governing Bodies (SGBs) comprising principals, educators, non-teaching staff, parents and learners (the latter only in the governing bodies of secondary schools). The role and functions of these democratically elected bodies are described in detail in the SASA (RSA 1996).

In the previous education dispensation in South Africa, the so-called Model C schools were primarily white schools. They followed a specific management and governance format which entailed that governing bodies became the owners of the school property and had the right to appoint teachers and charge school fees. These schools understandably had parents with greater managerial expertise and better academic qualifications than for example, township schools.

Over the last decade significant research has been conducted on the leadership role of school

principals in South African schools (Heystek 2004; Botha 2006; Marishane 2009). However, very little research has been done on the role and responsibilities of principals with regard to the management and governance of schools in a post-apartheid South Africa, and their roles and responsibilities as members of the SGB.

Persistent power struggles may arise when principals overplay their roles and responsibilities with regard to their contribution to the SGB. However, before this issue can be set as the problem statement for this study, the concept of decentralised management in the school context needs to be conceptualised.

1.2 Decentralised Management in the School Context

Widespread demands for educational reform have resulted from intense disaffection with the centralisation of education management. In response to these demands, attempts have been made to decentralise or democratise school management in South Africa. As various studies indicate, these reforms are gaining momentum (Fullan and Watson 1999; Caldwell 2005; The World Bank 2007).

While the decentralisation or democratisation of school management is generally understood to refer to the devolution of decision-making authority from a higher central level to the lower local level, it also refers to the shifting of decision-making power

from the Department of Education to school level. This results in a focus that falls squarely on the school as the primary unit of educational change.

The move in support of decentralisation is motivated by the belief that a school can improve if those closer to it have the power and freedom to decide how to use the resources geared towards its improvement (Marishane 2009). This belief has led to the development of decentralisation policies in many countries and the implementation of various strategies to implement these policies. One such strategy is called school-based management (SBM) or site-based management, and is widely applied in Britain, Canada, Australia and the United States of America.

In different countries the decentralisation of management policies through the application of an SBM strategy has brought about the emergence of different types of schools with different degrees of authority. These include "Charter schools" in the United States and some parts of Canada (Vanourek 2005), "Foundation schools" in Britain (West and Pennell 2005) and "Section 21 schools" in South Africa (Marishane 2003).

At present there is a considerable body of international and comparative literature on the influence of the democratisation of education on society in general (Apple 1993; Harber and Davies 1997; Bean and Apple 1999; Mosoge and Van der Westhuizen 1999; Davies et al. 2002; Mulford 2006). The literature supports the idea that education should be democratised. Authors writing about the matter agree unanimously that shared decision-making and the encouragement of participation by all stakeholders in the school context lead to more effective schools and consequently to the democratisation of schools (Mncube 2005).

In the light of the above overview, democratic school management can be defined as decentralised school management involving power sharing to ensure that school policies are developed democratically, through rational discourse and deliberations, by the principal and all the democratically elected representatives of the SGB (parents, learners, educators and other stakeholders).

1.3 The Role of the School Governing Body (SGB)

Democratic school management emphasises that decisions in a school should be based on consultation and collaboration. All the stakeholders in the SGB should participate in the decision-

making process. In a discussion of the role of SGBs in the democratic school management process, Sayed (2002) points out some of the complexities encountered with regard to the role and responsibilities of the school principal in this process.

Sayed (2002) emphasises that each member of the SGB has his or her own views of the school and how it should be managed. In this regard, Sayed (2002) refers to the functions of the SGB, including the appointment of staff, the formulation of a language policy and decisions on school fees. He argues that these functions "can tend to produce conflict rather than clarity". Deem et al. (1995: 133) agree and add that "power relations are central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and ... power relations are an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of school governing bodies as organizations."

1.4 Problem Statement of the Study

This situation may cause different stakeholders to develop different perceptions of the role and responsibilities of school principals in the SGB. Van Wyk (1998) states that parents and other stakeholders in the SGB prefer to relinquish their responsibilities to principals and teachers in the belief that professional educators are more familiar with school management. For decades the principal's role was regarded as a complex task (Phillips 1990; Johnson 1994). The principal's role is becoming increasingly complex as impassioned calls for school reforms, including greater accountability and shared governance, parental choice and school safety, escalate within and outside schools (Wilmore 2000; Vick 2004; Levine 2005; Southworth and Du Quesnay 2005).

In light of the above, an empirical investigation has been done to investigate the role and responsibilities of school principals in the democratic management of schools in South Africa. The study sought to answer the following research question: What are the other SGB members' perceptions of the management role and responsibilities of the school principal in the SGB?

II. METHODOLOGY

The study, based on earlier research on this issue by Mncube (2008, 2009), was designed to determine the perceptions of SGB members with regard to the role and responsibilities of school

principals in the SGB. With this in mind, a qualitative research approach was undertaken to obtain data in a sample of four purposefully selected, but divergent (in terms of context and culture) Gauteng secondary schools. The researcher obtained permission from the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE) to purposefully select these four secondary schools in Gauteng for this study.

Data were collected in an attempt to understand various SGB members' perceptions of the role and responsibilities of the school principal as member of the SGB in these schools. The qualitative approach undertaken included the use of in-depth interviews, observation and document analysis.

Firstly, 24 semi-structured interviews were conducted with SGM members in the four purposefully selected schools in order to get their views on the role and responsibilities of school principals in the SGB. Six members of each of the four SGBs were interviewed, namely the chairperson, the principal, an educator, one non-teaching staff member, one parent and one learner. The purpose of the interviews, which were conducted in English, was to investigate the perceptions of the various stakeholders with regard to the role and responsibilities of principals as members of the SGB.

Each of the interviews was approximately 20 minutes long. The same interview schedule was used for all participants. To protect the anonymity of these selected schools, the researcher decided to name them Schools A, B, C and D. A brief description of each of the schools follows:

School A is a rural school and its learners are all black. The school is relatively disadvantaged, but better resourced than many other rural schools in the same province: it has electricity and proper flushing toilets, for example. The number of classrooms is totally inadequate (as many as 65 learners have to crowd into a single classroom). All its educators are black and its learners are ethnically homogeneous (mainly Sotho). The local community consists of a few working-class families, but unemployment in the area is very high and about 70 per cent of the 500 learners qualify for a fee exemption. The school buildings are of a reasonably good standard.

School B is a township secondary school on the outskirts of a large city. The school offers academic subjects and is attended by black learners. This school is relatively advantaged compared to rural schools in the same province. It has an adequate number of classrooms, even though classrooms are still overcrowded (50 or more

learners per classroom). All its educators are black and they mainly speak Sotho. The buildings were renovated ten years ago and are well maintained. The school has 1 200 learners and almost 50 per cent of them qualify for a fee exemption.

School C is a co-educational secondary school formerly reserved for so-called Indian learners of the former Department of Education and Culture, although some learners from other culture groups (coloured and white) have been admitted lately. The majority of educators are Indian. The school is relatively advantaged and offers a wide range of academic subjects. The surrounding community comprises middle-class as well as working-class residents, and half of the learners commute from the surrounding rural areas in search of better-quality education. The school buildings are not in a very good condition; they have been vandalised and not repaired, mainly because of financial shortfalls. More than 30 per cent of learners qualify for a fee exemption.

School D is a former Model C secondary school with 700 learners. It is situated in pleasant urban surroundings in a rural town in Gauteng. The local neighbourhood is racially integrated and consists of middle-class families; however, white residents predominate. It is a privileged school compared to the other three schools. The majority of educators and administrative staff are white. More than 80 per cent of the learners can afford to pay school fees. The school buildings are adequate and well maintained compared to the other schools.

Secondly, during the observation phase, two formal SGB meetings were observed at each school. In addition, source documents were examined. These documents were used to complement the other data collection methods, rather than as substantive evidence. The main documents used were agendas and minutes of SGB meetings, letters to parents, annual reports to parents, disciplinary records and curriculum material. For ethical reasons, access to documents and records was negotiated in advance.

III. OBSERVATIONS AND DISCUSSION

The data obtained from the in-depth interviews and observation were then analysed. Responses were transcribed and coded, while responses that were similar were grouped together. The following five themes emerged from the findings:

- Perceptions of SGB members of the responsibilities of principals in SGBs

- Principals' own perceptions of their responsibilities in SGBs
- The role of the principal in effective school–community communication and relationships
- Culture, context and the principal's role in school management
- Issues of power relations in school management matters

During the interviews, comments made by both the principals as well as other members of the SGBs were in line and congruent with what is found in the literature. The respondents' responses to questions asked during the interview phase and the researcher's conclusions about each of the themes that have emerged from the findings, will now be briefly discussed.

3.1 Perceptions of SGB Members of the Responsibilities of the Principal

The majority of SGB members interviewed have a positive perception of their principal's role in the school. They agree that the principal ensures that education policies are implemented and that requirements of the SASA are met. These findings, that are not surprising as the principal is responsible for the daily management of the school, are confirmed by the research literature, which suggests that the principals' main task is to lead and manage the school (Epstein 1997; Botha 2006).

In this regard, one respondent (an educator) from School C said the following: *He (the principal) is the finger on the pulse of what is happening in our school, he is our resource person and he is the 'heart' of our institution.*

The SGB chairperson of School D added the following:

Our principal guides the SGB, he acts as representative of the DoE as well as mediator between the SGB and the DoE. He informs us (SGB members) of what is happening in our school, he carries out his management and leadership functions in a very professional way.

One of the learners at School D continued: *Our principal plays an important role in the effective day-to-day running of the school, ensuring that all decisions affecting us are taken in fairness and well in time.* During his interview the chairperson of the SGB of School C mentioned that the school principal *is always willing to share information and delegate responsibilities to the other members of the school governing body.*

Some of the respondents from School B felt that the principal dictated other SGB members, and in the process controlled the SGB in an authoritative manner. The SASA (RSA 1996) clearly states that the principal should work harmoniously with other SGB members. The chairperson of the SGB should be in charge and set the tone of SGB meetings. This was observed to be the case in those schools which were operating democratically, namely Schools A, C and D. School B was the only exception. The chairperson of the SGB of this school voiced his dissatisfaction:

I don't know why our school has a governing body. It is of no use and is really only a waste of our time. The principal takes the final decision anyway; we feel like puppets and are only there because it is required of us. I will not be willing to serve again in the future, it is futile.

During the interviews it was also noted that respondents thought the principal was responsible for the training and capacity building of other SGB members. Section 19(2) of the SASA (RSA 1996) clearly stipulates that the provincial DoE must ensure that principals render all the necessary assistance to other SGB members to enable them to perform their duties effectively. In this way SGBs reinforce and extend the role of the school principal as a key figure in the promotion of an effective SGB leading to an effective school.

3.2 Principals' Own Perceptions of Their Responsibilities in the SGB

The majority of principals interviewed (75%) strongly believe that their main responsibility is to manage teaching and learning, while half of them (50%) regard school management as the most important part of a principal's work. All the principals (100%) believe that the SGB makes a valuable contribution to the success and effectiveness of the school. The correlation between managing teaching and learning and principals' beliefs about school management issues means that schools with effective SGBs should also get better academic results.

Even though the study did not aim at comparing the effectiveness of each school, the difference in effectiveness was evident in the previous Grade 12 pass rates of the different schools. At Schools A, C and D the principals indicated that their main responsibility was to manage the teaching and learning process (that is instructional leadership or management), and these

schools have all obtained a pass rate of more than 60% during the 2009 matriculation examination.

The high importance of instructional management in comparison with any other management responsibility was further confirmed when 75% of principals (in Schools A, D and C) disagreed that managing the budget was more important than managing teaching and learning. What may account for this is that principals feel that budgeting is one of the main responsibilities of the SGB, and not their own responsibility. Affirming the principals' views on their responsibilities with regard to instructional management, all educators and parent members of the SGB agreed that instructional management was the main task of the school principal, and that other issues such as budgeting were less important and primarily the task of the SGB as a whole (Kruger 2003).

Only one principal (of undemocratic School B) believes that he should be in charge of the SGB. The rest of the principals as well as other SGB members interviewed share the perception that the chairperson of the SGB is the person in charge.

3.3 The Role of Principals in School-Community Communication and Relations

The majority of principals interviewed (75%) indicated that they have good relationships with parents and other members of the SGB, while half of them (50%) indicated good relationships with the communities they serve and educators at their school. Only one principal (School D) indicated that he had a "very good" relationship with the rest of the SGB. This may be an indication that the other three principals have a sound relationship with parents in general, but have difficulty working with the SGB. This accounts for the power struggles noted in some schools and the lack of faith of some principals in other members of the SGB. It is also striking that the relationship between the principal and learner members of the SGB was very poor. One principal (School B) questioned the role of learners SGB members as follows:

Can anyone explain to me why learners have to sit in on SGB meetings? During meetings they sit and play with their cell phones and do not show any interest in what is being discussed. They are more of a nuisance than of help to us, specifically when it comes to important decisions that have to be taken in the interest of our school.

From the interviews it is evident that the majority of SGB members view the principal's main role,

apart from instructional leader, as mediator between the school and community. The view of a teacher at School C is of particular importance in this regard:

Our principal is essential for the functioning of the governing body, as he is the manager of the school, and is always able to inform other stakeholders of the issues and needs of the school. He coordinates meetings of the governing body and has the responsibility to keep parents informed of all that is happening at the school.

Other SGB members interviewed indicated a strong need to improve communication and stakeholders' access to information. However, it became evident that the ineffectiveness of some SGBs was exacerbated by poor communication between the principal and other SGB members. At School B, for example, parent members of the SGB were not informed of critical issues involving for example a teacher who had made a learner pregnant, and a learner who had stabbed another learner. One parent SGB member of School B indicated that he sometimes overheard issues being discussed by other SGB members, but that they, as members, had not been informed of those issues themselves.

This emphasised the need for effective communication in the school context. Communication between the school and community should be a two-way exchange and should reflect a co-equal partnership between the family and school. Epstein (1987) argues that those educators' who work with parents effectively, understand their learners better, generate unique rather than routine solutions to classroom problems and reach a shared understanding with parents and learners.

Some of the SGB members interviewed noted the benefits of effective communication between school and home, including transparency, openness, fairness and honesty. These are also some of the characteristics of democratic institutions. However, some SGB members had their doubts about this. One SGB member (a teacher) at School B said the following in this regard:

We are supposed to live in a democratic society, schools should also be democratic, meaning that there must be openness, transparency and good communication in the school. In our schools this simply does not happen. Our principals can't communicate and the rest of the school does not have a clue of what is going on.

Harmonious relations between SGB members have been associated with a variety of positive outcomes, including better matriculation results,

lower dropout rates and less staff turnover. It should therefore be the aim of every principal to ensure good relations in schools.

This corresponds with the literature on the principal's role in effective communication with the community. Some of the authors note the importance and benefits of effective two-way communication between the school and the home repeatedly (Harber and Davies 1997; Lemmer and Van Wyk 2004). Vick (2004) adds that effective communication in the school context is imperative for a democratic society.

3.4 Culture, Contexts and the Principal's Role in the SGB

Some principals and SGB chairpersons interviewed remain traditional in their approach and do not believe in parental and learner involvement. The chairperson of the SGB at School A, for example, perceived learner members of the SGB as minors who should listen to the discussions, but not contribute to them. It also became clear that efforts of principals in the SGB to introduce changes tend to fail if they ignore the culture and context of the schools where change is meant to take place.

Certain constraints, such as culture, time, income and education, tend to generate large social class-based inequalities in the SGB that could jeopardise its functioning. With regard to the participation of SGB members, these constraints largely depend on cultural resources. Time is a very important resource, and time is translated into money when earnings have to be forfeited because time is taken off at work to attend SGB meetings.

Social position manifests in the present study in the ways in which SGB members function. The present research has found that SGB members from affluent communities influence SGB decisions, and input from SGB members, specifically parents, from less fortunate backgrounds, do not carry the same weight. One parent SGB member from School A stated very clearly: *I am sitting between these people during a meeting, all of them have money, and I can't see how my input will change their decisions. They simply don't take me seriously, and I know why.*

3.5 Power Relations in School Management Matters

Most SGB members interviewed felt that the principal was the most powerful member of the

body. The principal has a great influence on the SGB and many suggestions emanate from him since he knows the school more intimately than parent members. Participants in the study regarded the principal as the leader without whom nearly nothing would be accomplished. One parent SGB member from School C said the following in this regard:

The principal acts as facilitator at SGB meetings and is a member of each subcommittee, for example the finance committee, forming the link between the provincial Department of Education, the school and the SGB. He is the boss, and we listen to what he has to say.

The principal's position of power is demonstrated by the extent to which parents are allowed to participate in SGB decision-making. In School A, parents are not given the opportunity to play a full role in SGB decisions. In most cases decisions are taken by the principal as member of the School Management Team or SMT (referring to the senior management of the school, namely the principal, the deputy principal and Heads of Departments) instead of the SGB. The principal, together with the chairperson of the SGB, should ensure that all stakeholders are part of the decision-making process. In another example of how power relations manifest, a parent member of the SGB of School C explained: *At times the SMT takes decisions which are supposed to have been taken by the SGB. The SMT takes over the role of the SGB and there is a conflict of roles between the school government and the school management.*

The above quote from one of the participants in this study clearly suggests that unequal power relations are prevalent in the functioning of SGBs in some schools. In some situations the principal tend to overplay his or her role, which causes problems, and eventually creates tension and conflict among SGB members. Deem et al. (1995) contend that power relations are central to any understanding of the processes of school management, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and that power relations are an ineradicable feature of the delicate nature of the SGB as management structure. In contrast, power relations in the more effective SGBs were well managed.

The leadership style of school principals who tend to overplay their hand inhibits the participation of other members of the SGB, specifically learner and parent members. This is a contravention of section 16(1) and 16(2) of SASA (RSA 1996). These sections state very clearly that the manage-

ment of the school is the responsibility of the SGB. However, at some schools sampled, specifically School A and School C, the principals found that some parents, particularly black parents, were reluctant to serve on the SGB. This is corroborated by various authors in the literature (Van Wyk 1998; Lotter 2003; Hystek 2004) who have found that parents are reluctant to participate in school management matters. A teacher member of the SGB at School A said the following in this regard:

Despite the power that the SGB has been endowed with, parents do not seem to be active enough. It tends to be the same group of parents who always take part. The bulk of the parents lack interest and commitment to the SGB. This is across the board and not only racially motivated.

Van Wyk (1998) contends that many parent SGB members shift their responsibilities to school principals. Moreover, some educator SGB members argue that it is inconceivable that illiterate parents should tell educators what to do. The power relations between the school principal and SGBs were even more evident when the issue of learner expulsion was handled; and this typical problem was noted in all the schools sampled. In School A, the decision to expel a learner illustrated the powerful position of the principal. In this case the principal and his SMT, instead of the SGB, took the decision. This was done in contravention of the South African Schools Act (RSA 1996) and its amendments. A parent member of the SGB of this school argued:

The principal and his SMT were responsible for the expulsion but, on the hearing of the case, which was conducted after the learner had already been expelled, the teaching staff falsely mentioned that the SGB had recommended the expulsion of this learner. Parents and learners were not involved in that decision.

This situation suggests that some SGBs are still given so-called "puppet status" (Kent 2002) and cannot exercise their authority. In this sense they exist only for window-dressing, which is not the aim of the SASA. The present research has also found there are power struggles among different types of SGB members at some schools. Such struggles were often noted between chairpersons of SGBs and principals. In these schools, a power struggle was noted between teaching staff, and parent and learner members of the SGB: the teaching staff was found to be taking over the role of parent and learner members in the decision-making process. This was particularly true for learners at the township school (School B),

where learners and parents were excluded from decision-making.

For this reason some parents became unhappy with the teaching staff. In this regard Bush (1995) says: "Where there is power there is also resistance." Some of the interviewed SGB members indicated that some principals in rural areas often abused their power. They were abetted by chairpersons. In some rural schools, members demand a bribe if a teacher wants to be appointed, or the candidate is obligated to join a certain pressure group or to affiliate with the SGB chairperson or principal. Bush and Heystek (2003) have found that some traditional leaders demand money from poor parents who should be exempt from paying school fees.

The principals played a dominant role in SGB meetings and in decision-making at the schools that were investigated, with the exception of School B. The literature suggests that this is due to the principal's position of power and his or her level of education in comparison with that of other SGB members (Karlsson 2002). Together with the school principals, teachers are actively involved in decision-making in SGBs. This was the case at all four case study schools, which indicates the important influence of the level of education of SGB members on their individual roles.

IV. CONCLUSION

This study explored SGB members' perceptions of the role and responsibilities of school principals in the democratic management of South African schools. Issues such as the principals' own perceptions of their responsibilities in schools, the role of the school principal in school-community communication and relations, as well as power struggles within the SGB were also dealt with in the study. The positive role which principals can play in SGBs was illuminated by many SGB members. The effect of the culture and context of schools was observed in a rural school, where it was found that the principal tended to overplay his role, and the difficulties this caused in the functioning of the SGB, particularly with regard to the relationship between the chairperson of the SGB and the principal.

V. RECOMMENDATIONS

Communication is an important ingredient of the relationship between the school and the community. One of the main tasks of the principal

is to ensure that there are adequate lines of communication. It is also very important that the school principal should support transformation in schools by opening up space for debate and dialogue that would enable parents and learners to participate sufficiently in SGBs. Silencing the voices of parents and learners implicitly or explicitly would mean that social justice and democracy are not promoted in SGBs. The phenomenon of culture was further observed in the township school where the chairperson of the SGB felt that learners do not have a contribution to make to SGB decision-making, but are merely there to listen on behalf of other learners in the school. Power relations are central to an understanding of school management.

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