

Involvement of Parents in the Governance of Rural Schools: The Experiences of Parents

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ABSTRACT The aim of this article is to explore the experiences of parents in the school governance of rural schools in South Africa. An argument is presented that although the involvement of parents in the school governance in South Africa is taken as a fait accompli; the reality is that in rural schools, this remains a wishful thinking, despite the fact that parents are primary stakeholders in the governance of schools. This has become apparent with the establishment of new education policies upon which parent involvement in school governance in South African education is built. Taking into account the high rate of illiteracy in the rural areas, the article aims, amongst others, to probe the experiences of parents in the governance of rural schools and to investigate their understanding of legislations and policies that impact on school governance. The empirical method, namely quantitative research, was used to obtain information from parents about their involvement in school governance, focusing on their understanding of legislations and policies that impact on school governance. The study is concluded by the submission that parents should be trained so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance activities.

INTRODUCTION

There are literally hundreds of books, journal articles, and stand-alone reports on the subject of parent involvement in education. The studies conducted on parent involvement in education are based mainly on ordinary public schools. Most of these studies have been in relation to student academic achievement, as there is a strong belief among the proponents of parent involvement in education that support from parents is the most important way to improve academic results in the schools (Duma 1995). Whereas such studies are available in South Africa and in the developed and developing countries, there are no major studies available that specifically deal with the experiences of parents in rural school governance.

According to Duma (2009), the tendency of policy makers to empower school level stakeholders, in particular, parents contributes to the establishment of a new framework of school governance. Concerning parents, decentralisation has enhanced their roles and extended their responsibilities to include collaboration with principals and teachers in school governance. As parents are offered more power to be involved in school processes and policy, an opportunity is presented for challenging their competence and for redesigning their work, including their interactions with teachers. Parents are an impor-

tant component within the school system, to which principals and teachers must be responsive. In the initiation of school decentralisation, policy makers expect parents to be active partners who have influence over school decision-making and participate in school activities and governance. The empowerment of parents is further endorsed and encouraged by the market ideology and consumer orientations that penetrate into schools. In this regard, parents have influence over educational reforms although they are partners in school policy-making processes. The empowerment of both parents is assumed to contribute to substantial parent-teacher interaction (Sigudla 2002).

Mncube (2005) asserts that the research literature has not reached a consensus regarding parent-teacher relations during a period of school decentralisation. Some researchers have indicated that the school reform has not affected traditional parent-teacher relations, in which teachers control the instructional component and parents provide support (Monadjem 2003). Seroto (2004) argues that parents' empowerment has intensified existing conflicts between the teacher and parents as some teachers feel that parents' empowerment decreases their wellbeing, introduces uncertainty into their work, and raises questions about their professional discretion. This assertion is endorsed by Duma (2013) as points out that empowered parents,

particularly when they are from a high socio-economic status background, may affect teachers' control over school governance matters and these parents may be regarded as troublesome by some teachers. Although teachers have interest in cooperating with, and being supported by parents on one side, on the other side they may express discomfort with parents' participation in schools and may resist their intervention (Mncube 2005).

Education worldwide is becoming increasingly accountable to the public and therefore it can be argued that parents should play a role in policy making and execution, as they institute a major stakeholder group. Mechanisms to involve parents in the governance of schools are employed globally as a form of democratising education. Duma (2010) argues that it becomes difficult to dispute the benefits that parents can have for children's school experiences, yet parents participating in school governance and school principals often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play. Duma (2013) further on observed that that school principals and parents engaged in school governance often have uncertainties about the roles that the each should play in the governance of schools. Some principals love to have parents intricately involved in the governance of their schools, while others feel that too much parent engagement in the governance of schools violates their sense of professionalism. Monadjem (2003) warns that some principals have a negative attitude towards parents. Principals with such an attitude, tend to blame parents for prying in the school governance processes. Mncube (2009) strengthens this notion by submitting that some school principals regard themselves as superior to parents. They are reluctant to work with parents participating in school governance and are negative towards them as they regard them as irksome and troublesome. Mken-tane (2003) argues that if school principals ignore the strengths that the father and mother figures can bring to schools, valuable resources that could have a positive impact on the school governance activities are neglected.

During the Apartheid era in South Africa, parent involvement in school governance was arranged according to race distinctions and the idea of including black parents in the statutory bodies of the school governance had always been ignored (Duma 1995). According to Seroto

(2004), many commissions were appointed to deal with parent participation in schools. These commissions recommended the establishment of school committees and school boards so that Black parents could share, as far as possible, in the life and control of the schools in which their children are enrolled. Seroto (2004) contends that although the school committees were established to involve black parents in educational matters, in real terms the White officials had the last say in all matters affecting the school governance structures of Black schools. The duties and functions of the school committees were restricted as they were not even consulted and represented when educational policies, which affected the children, were formulated. It was only in 1996, that the South African democratic state promulgated the National Education Policy Act (Act No. 27 of 1996) which outlined the organisation, management, and governance of schools. It stipulated that education policies have to ensure broad public participation in the development of the education system and the representation of stakeholders in the governance of all aspects of the education system (RSA 1996). This Act, for the first time, provided for the need of parent-involvement in school governance matters irrespective of their literacy competence. Consequently, the aim of the article is to draw attention to issues such as the school governance areas of parents in school governance, their knowledge of school governance legislations and to probe their experiences in school governance.

Conceptualising the Involvement of Parents in School Governance

The term "parent involvement" includes several different forms of parent participation in education. Parents are involved in a working relationship with the school that is characterised by a sense of purpose and of mutual respect. This relationship implies a sharing of information, responsibility, skills, decision-making and accountability (Wolfendale 1989). Parent involvement in this article refers to parent participation at a level of school governance in rural schools.

The philosophy underpinning this paper is a democratic theory of education. Mncube (2008) contends that a democratic theory of education was concerned with the process of "double democratisation", the synchronized democrati-

sation of both education and society. On the contrary, without a more democratic system of education, the development of a democratic society was unlikely to take place. Mncube (2009) further on declares that there is now a significant amount of international and comparative literature on democratic education, which includes the many arguments supporting it, alluding to Davies and Kirkpatrick (2000), Davies (2002), Davies et al. (2002), Harber (2004), Murphy (2006), as examples.

Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools, Mncube (2008) suggests that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only as one experience them. Therefore schools need to perform what they seek to endorse. Mncube (2009) asserts that democratic schools and democracy itself do not grow by chance, but they result from explicit attempts by educators, and thus schools, to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. Therefore, a democratic school is one that allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberations dealing with the school governance, where they are prepared to live in democracy through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. In terms of this article, these skills, values, and behaviours are obtained through active democratic involvement of parents in school governance. This implies that in school governing bodies, parents like other role players have a vital role to play in school governance (Martin and Holt 2002).

In this paper democratic theory of education premises democratic school governance in which the role of parents in school governance operations is indispensable. The establishment of the school governing bodies in South Africa increased the role of parents in school governance activities (Duma 2013).

Motivation of the Study

Various factors strengthen the role of parents in the school governance. These factors foster the ability of parents to evaluate information and press their own interpretation and conceptions. The main objective of involving parents in school governance is to promote the welfare of the schools and to ensure that the students receive the best possible education. The process of involving rural parents in school

governance is difficult to manage because of the high rate of illiteracy among them. Despite the opportunities brought by the new education legislations and the need for improvement in school governance, the conditions of school governance structures in rural schools today still need serious improvement.

The researcher, having worked in rural schools as a principal and currently as a lecturer, visiting these schools to lend support to the university student teachers, perceives that rural school parents have difficult experience in school governance and the support from the Department of Education is not evident.

Problem Statement

Decentralised governance within the school system requires that the parents play a vital role in school governance matters. However, there are wide varieties that may inhibit positive parent involvement in school governance, such as the educational background of the parents, their socio-economic conditions and the absence of capacity building programmes for parents serving in school governing bodies (Mkentane 2003). The problem which is of major concern in this paper is what are the experiences of parents in the governance of rural schools in South Africa?

METHODOLOGY

To address the research problem, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative research design were undertaken.

Quantitative Research Paradigm

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study.

The research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents (size of the sample and sampling procedures), the research instruments, namely the questionnaires, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

Population and Sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select twenty five parents serving school governing bodies in each circuit of Sisonke and UMgungundlovu Districts as

respondents. Since these two districts have eight circuits, two hundred parents were selected as respondent. This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature, and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (Kumar 2014). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as research instrument. As Kumar (2014) maintains that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent sufficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analysed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained in other methods.

Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 dealt with the biographic and general information. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on parents' experiences in the governance of rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: *Fully Agree, Agree, Disagree and Fully Disagree*.

Section 3 also had closed questions, focusing on the parents' knowledge of the school governance legislations and policies. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Good, Average, and Poor*. Section 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein parents were asked to write down the problems they encounter in school governance.

Administration of the Questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in five rural schools. These schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the

questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability, consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires. In the main study, 200 parents were randomly selected and were requested to complete their questionnaires.

The first sample population responses were 146 (73%) schools. After the follow-ups, 170 (85%) schools returned the usable questionnaires. That represented a satisfying response.

Data Processing

After all the questionnaires had been received, the important task was then to reduce the mass of data obtained to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were coded and frequency distributions were generated.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents

When the item of parents' qualifications was analysed, it was realized that all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data. Table 1 provided the researcher with knowledge of the educational background of rural school parents. A total population of 170 (n=170) responded.

Table 1 revealed that high proportion of respondents were either illiterate or semiliterate. This confirms the assertion that the education level of the population in the rural school areas is very low, with high percentages of functional illiteracy. The high illiteracy rate of parents adversely affects school governance, as they cannot meaningfully participate in the school governance activities. This has also been noted by Monadjem (2003), as she contends that parent illiteracy and unemployment have been identified as two of the biggest barriers to parent involvement in education in South Africa. The education background of parents prohibits them from making significant contributions in school

Table 1: Educational background of parents

<i>Education qualification</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
No formal schooling	68	40
Below grade 12	68	40
Above grade 12	34	20
Total	170	100

governance matters as some decisions on policy level need trained people.

Parents' Experiences in the Governance of Rural Schools

Table 2 focused on the experiences of parents in the governance of rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Fully Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Fully Disagree*.

Parents Determine the Aims and the Overall Conduct of the School

In Table 2, there was congruence among the respondent that parents determine the aims and the overall conduct of the school. It may be appropriate to relate this response to the negative impact that apartheid education had on black parents and the resistance to it. For years parents in rural schools did not participate in the governance of their schools. The 1996 South African Schools Act came as a blessing to them, as for the first time they had ownership of the school and could determine the overall conduct of the school, which includes the formulation of the school's mission, vision and so forth (RSA 1996). In addition to this, literature on school governance stresses the role of parents in assuring that mission, aims and vision are in place (Heystek 2004).

Parents Formulate and Implement School Policies

Table 2 also revealed that the majority of the respondents indicated that they agreed that parents formulate and implement school policies.

The South African Schools Act (Section 20c) stipulates that members of the school governing should develop and implement school policies (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005). The parents in school governing bodies work collaboratively with other members to achieve a unifying mission, vision and goals of the school. The parents are indispensable assets and resources in the successful formulation and implementation of school policies. Karlsson (2002) emphasises that a central element of what constitutes meaningful parent involvement, is the involvement of parents in the governance structures of the school.

Parents Set the Framework of the School Curriculum

The majority of the respondents disagreed that parents need to set the framework of the school curriculum. The high proportion of respondents disagreeing may be based on the understanding that parents of rural schools are either illiterate or semi-literate and their educational background rules them incompetent to determine the school curriculum.

Parents Draft and Control the School Budget

As seen from Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents indicated that parents draft and controls the school budget. The South African Schools Act places the responsibility for the financial management of the school in the hands of the school governing body (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005). Taking into account the fact this places the responsibility for the financial management of the school in the hands of parents; they need assistance in acquiring skills

Table 2: Parents' experiences in the governance of rural schools

<i>Items</i>		<i>Fully agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Fully disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Parents determine the aims and overall conduct of the school.	N	0	102	68	0	170
	%	0	60	40	0	100
Parents formulate and implement school policies	N	0	102	68	0	170
	%	0	60	40	0	100
Parents set the framework of the school curriculum	N	0	17	102	51	170
	%	0	10	60	30	100
Parents draft and control school budget	N	34	102	34	0	170
	%	20	68	20	0	100
Parents maintain school facilities	N	136	34	0	0	170
	%	80	20	0	0	100

that would enhance their efforts in improving financial management of the school.

Parents Maintain the School Facilities

All the respondents in Table 2 are congruent on the issue that parents should maintain the school facilities. This is in line with the stipulations of the South African Schools Act, Section 20, as it demands that the school governing body must administer and control the school's property, buildings, and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels, if applicable (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005). Arguments have been advanced that this area of parent involvement better fits parents, as some principals argue that parents have little to offer in matters of curriculum and pedagogy. Mashile (2000) accentuates that parent involvement in decision making bodies does not necessarily mean that parents are actually making decisions, as their involvement has little impact, for instance, on the curriculum, and may be only tokenism.

Parents' Knowledge of the School Governance Legislations and Policies

Table 3 focused on the parents' knowledge of the school governance legislations and policies. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Good, Average and Poor*.

The Parents' Knowledge of the South African Schools Act

Table 3 revealed that a majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that they had a poor knowledge of the South African Schools Act.

The South African Schools Act is the engine of school governance. It deals with the most important school governance policies. It is therefore ironical that the majority of the respondents had a poor knowledge of the "engine power" of school administration. Monadjem (2003) astutely points out that parents, as members of the school governing bodies, should transform schools into organisations that are participative. This transformation must encourage shared responsibility and a leadership style that will create an interactive working environment. One needs to mention that parents that are ignorant of the South African Schools Act are a liability to the school as they do not effect any school governance duties as per the mandate of the school governance legislations.

The Parents' Knowledge of the Educators Employment Act

Table 3 furthermore revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the Educators' Employment Act was poor. The South African Schools Act Section 20(i) mandates the governing body of a public school to recommend to the Head of the Department the appointment of educators at the school, subject to the 1998 Employment of Educators Act. The responsibilities implied by of the Act pose a mammoth task for the illiterate and semi-literate parents and they cannot be expected to perform this task if their knowledge of the Employment of Educators' Act is poor.

The Parents' Knowledge of the Learners' Code of Conduct

Table 3 also revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that their

Table 3: Parents' knowledge of the school governance legislations and policies

<i>Items</i>		<i>Good</i>	<i>Average</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Total</i>
South African Schools Act	N	0	68	102	170
	%	0	40	60	100
Educators Employment Act	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100
	%	0	40	60	100
Learners' Code of Conduct	N	0	68	102	170
	%	0	40	60	100
School's Admission Policy	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100
Schools Curriculum Framework	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100

knowledge of the learners' code of conduct was poor, despite the fact the South African Schools Act demands that the school governing bodies should draw up and adopt a code of conduct for learners, which must be respected by all learners and consists of school rules, sanctions and details of procedures that must be followed during disciplinary investigations.

The Parents' Knowledge of the School's Admission Policy

Table 3 also revealed that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school admission policy was poor. Rossouw and Oosthuizen (2005) contend that in terms of The South African Schools Act, the governing body must formulate and write the admission policy of the school. The basic mandate of the admission policy is that the school should not discriminate against learners, who must be admitted even if their parents cannot pay school fees.

The Parents' Knowledge of the School's Curriculum Framework

In conclusion, Table 3 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school's curriculum framework was poor. This implies that although the South African Schools Act, Section 21(1) (b) demands that a governing body may apply to the Head of Department to be allocated the function of determining the extra-mural curriculum of the school and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy (RSA 1996), nevertheless this was not happening. This may be caused by the fact that parents in rural schools are either illiterate or semi-literate.

In an open-ended question, respondents were required to mention the problems they encountered in their involvement in school governance. Their responses, ranked in the order of frequency, were as follows:

- ♦ They lack understanding of their role in school governance
- ♦ School governance legislations and policies are in English with no vernacular version available.
- ♦ Training is not provided in school governance matters

- ♦ Most parent involved in school governance are labourers, and employers do not allow them to attend the school governing body meetings on work days
- ♦ Principals dominate meetings and ignore suggestions from parents.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the experiences held by parents on their involvement in the governance of rural schools. Although evidence in this article suggests that there is no doubt that their involvement in school governance results in positive school governance outcomes, which are most important for successful education, nevertheless one of the great challenges is the illiteracy rate of parents in school governance, who should be playing a significant role in school governance activities. However, they lack the knowledge and the training to do so. It is essential for them to be given the necessary training, which should include the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge so they would be in a position to participate meaningfully in the school governance activities.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, parents made suggestions on what can be done to improve their participation in school governance, which included, among other things, the improvement of the literacy competence by attending literacy classes for all parents participating in school governance, attending training workshops on school governance. It was further on recommended that school governance should be redesigned to form new patterns of collaboration and empowerment of school principals and parents.

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