

Involvement of Parents in the Administration of Farm Schools in South Africa

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ABSTRACT The aim of this paper is to investigate the involvement of parents in the school administration of farm schools in South Africa. An argument is presented that although the involvement of parents in the administration of schools in South Africa is taken as a *fait accompli*, the reality is that in farm schools, this still remains a wishful thinking. The empirical method was used to obtain information from parents about their involvement in the administration of farm schools. The findings indicated that a high proportion of farm school parents are illiterate and semi-literate and this high illiteracy rate of parents negatively affects school administration, as they cannot successfully be a part of school administration activities. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for farm school parents to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school administration activities.

INTRODUCTION

There are literally hundreds of books, journal papers, and stand-alone reports on the subject of parent involvement in education. Various studies have been carried out on parent involvement in schools in the world in general and in South Africa in particular (Wilkins 2015; Jeynes 2015; Smrekar and Crowson 2015; Mncube 2009; Heystek 2004). 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 2010). 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 parent involvement in the administration of farm schools (Duma 2013).

Consequently, the purpose of this paper is to probe issues surrounding the involvement of parents in the administration of farm schools, parents' knowledge of school administration policies and problems encountered by parents in school administration.

Democratization of education, as stipulated in the South African Schools Act, includes the idea that parents, as one of the major stakeholders in schools, and should be able to participate in the administration of the schools, which can

be realized by the establishment of school governing bodies (Duma 2013). The term "parent involvement" includes several different forms of parent participation in education, however in this paper it refers to parent participation at a level of school administration in farm schools. On the same note, school administration in this paper refers to school governance, which encompasses management functions, management tasks and management areas. It centers on the administrative processes such as planning, decision-making, leading, organizing, coordinating, and controlling.

Before 1994 the South African education system was fragmented along racial lines, and entrenched the manner in which parent involvement existed in schools. The role of parents was limited to that of backbenchers and fundraisers only (Nzima 2002). Furthermore, parents in school administration structures were often appointed rather than elected. The present situation demands that all schools must have democratically elected school governing bodies, which are legally required to be involved in the administration process of schools (South Africa 1996), and perform school administration activities efficiently on behalf of the school, for the benefit of the community.

Gaganakis (1987) describes farm schools as schools that cater for Black children residing on White-owned farms. On the other hand, Nasson (2004) in the similar vein trenchantly defines a

farm school as a structure for formal school education in White agricultural areas located in the context of the farm and more precisely of the disciplinary social order, which farm life, produces. Ngwenya (1988) adds that farm schools are schools for Black children on White-owned farms, jointly controlled by the farm owner and the Department of Education. Ngwenya (1988) insists that this type of schooling is rooted in the structure of work discipline, social order and moral policing and in South Africa it was born into a situation of serious conflict and struggle between White farm owners and Black laborers.

Farm school parents are expected to make decisions, which warrant their competence in school administration activities. It is, therefore, ironic that farm school parents with little or no education are expected to deal with school administration issues (Duma 2014).

Discussion of Democratic Principles and Practices

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 democratization”, and the synchronized democratization 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 (Murphy 2006; Baugh and Horvat 2015; Kremer-Sadik and Fatigante 2015; Gottfried et al. 2015) as examples.

Emphasizing 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 experiences them. Mncube (2008) further on 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 behaviors (Wilkins 2015). In terms of this paper, these skills, values, and behaviors are obtained through active democratic involvement of parents in school governance. In this paper, the democratic theory of education premises democratic school governance wherein parent involvement in school administration is indispensable.

The paper addresses issues surrounding the involvement of parents in the administration of farm schools, parents’ knowledge of school administration policies and problems encountered by parents in school administration. Through data collection, in the form of questionnaires, the views of farm school parents regarding their involvement in school administration were uncovered.

Motivation of the Study

A cross-section of the field of education management reveals that very little research has been conducted on the involvement of parents in the administration of farm schools. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches on this issue.

The process of parent involvement in the school administration of farm schools is difficult to manage because of the high rate of illiteracy among them (Duma 2014). Despite the opportunities brought by the new legislations and the need for improvement in school administration, the parent involvement in the administration of farm schools today, still needs serious improvement.

The researcher, having worked in farm schools as a teacher and a principal and currently, as a lecturer visiting rural schools to lend support to the university student-teachers, perceives that parent involvement in the school administration has difficult experiences in the administration of schools and the support from school principals is not evident.

Research Problem

Decentralized governance within the school system requires that the parents play a vital role in school governance (Wilkins 2015). However, Duma and Mabusela (2015) observed that there were wide varieties that may inhibit positive par-

ent participation in school governance, such as the educational background of the parents, socioeconomic conditions and the absence of capacity building programs for parents. The following research problem was identified:

What are the issues surrounding the involvement of parents in the administration of farm schools in South Africa?

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

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

Literature Review

The researcher consulted literature, which is relevant to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

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 parents in each circuit in the Pietermaritzburg Region. Since the Pietermaritzburg region has 10 circuits, 200 parents were selected as respondents. This method was favored 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 the research instrument. As Kumar (2014) maintains that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent suf-

ficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analyzed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained through other methods.

Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into three sections with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 consisted of questions, which focus on the biographical and general information of the respondents. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the parents' knowledge of the school administration policies. The respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: *Good*, *Average* and *Poor*. Section 3 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein parents were asked to write down the problems they encounter in school administration.

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 actual study, principals were requested to distribute a questionnaire to a parents serving in school administration structures who would be able to complete it although this practice was difficult, as most farm school parents are illiterate, principals were, and nevertheless, in a position to know which parents would be able to complete the questionnaire.

The first sample population responses were from 146 (73%) schools. After the follow-ups, 24 schools returned the completed questionnaires to make total responses of 170 (85%) schools. 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' education background was analyzed, it was realized that all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

Table 1 shows that a total population of 170 (n=170) responded. Table 1 revealed that forty percent of the respondents have no formal schooling, another forty percent have schooling below Matric (grade 12), and only twenty percent have above Matric (grade 12) education level. This confirms the assertion that the education level of the population in the farm school areas is very low, with high percentages of functional illiteracy. The high illiteracy rate of parents adversely affects school administration, as they cannot meaningfully participate in the school administration activities. Baugh and Horvat (2015) note that expectations of parent involvement in education demand parents to evaluate and select educational options for their children and to support demanding academic standards for their children. This can only be carried out by parents that are literate and ca-

Table 1: Educational background of parents

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

pacitated through workshops and seminars. Duma (2014) contends that education background of parents prohibits them from making significant contributions in school administration matters, as some decisions on the policy level need trained people.

Parents' Knowledge of School Administration Policies

In Table 2 the information regarding the parents' evaluation of their knowledge of school administration policies is represented. 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 2 revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that they had a poor knowledge of the South African Schools Act. This implies that most parents do not know why or how they can be involved in school administration. The South African Schools Act is the engine of school governance. It deals with the most important school administration policies. It is the *de facto* kingpin of parent involvement in school administration as it contains the composition, duties, functions, rights and powers of parents. It is therefore ironical that the majority of parents have 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 organizations that are participative. This line of argument is supported by Baugh and Horvat (2015) as they assert that strong partnership between home and school

Table 2: Parents' knowledge of school administration documents 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
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

encourages shared responsibility and a leadership style that creates an interactive working environment. One needs to mention that parents that are ignorant of the school administration documents and policies are a liability to the school, as they cannot perform school administration duties.

The Parents' Knowledge of the Educators' Employment Act

Table 2 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 (Duma 2014). 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 was poor. Wilkins (2015) notes that schools need good governance, which must be executed by school governors. Parents who are members of the school governing bodies are parent governors tasked with the legal responsibility of holding senior school leadership (principal and deputies) to account for the financial and educational performance of the school. The less educated the parent governor is, the more intimidated she/he will be by getting involved in school administration matters

The Parents' Knowledge of the Learners' Code of Conduct

Table 2 also revealed that more than half of the respondents (60%) indicated that their 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 2 in addition revealed that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that their

knowledge of the school admission policy was poor. Potgieter et al. (1997) contend that in terms of the South African Schools Act, the governing body must formulate and write the admission policy of the school, which may not conflict with Section 9(4) of the Constitution. 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 2 revealed that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school's curriculum framework is 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 extramural curriculum of the school and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy (South Africa 1996), nevertheless this is not happening. This may be caused by the fact that parents in the farm 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 administration. Their responses ranked in the order of frequency were as follows:

- ♦ They lack understanding of their role in school administration.
- ♦ School administration documents and policies are in English, with no vernacular version available.
- ♦ Training is not provided in school administration matters.
- ♦ Most parents are farm laborers, and farm owners and this does not allow them to attend the school governing body meetings on workdays.

CONCLUSION

The study examined the involvement of parents in the school administration of farm schools in South Africa. In this paper it was noted that parents need 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 behaviors. These skills, values, and behaviors are obtained through active democratic involvement of parents in school administration. The study furthermore addressed issues surrounding the parents' knowledge of school administration policies and problems encountered by parents in school administration. In this study, it has been reported that a high proportion of farm school parents are illiterate and semi-literate and this high illiteracy rate of parents negatively affects school administration, as they cannot successfully participate in school administration activities. In conclusion, the study furthermore revealed that the majority of parents had poor knowledge of the school administration documents and policies, while these are the cornerstones of school administration.

Given the inadequacy of parents, the school principal becomes solely responsible for school administration and he/she is therefore the only one capable of making meaningful decisions in the school. This implies that in most farm schools there is no evidence of parents sharing the responsibilities and leadership activities in the school.

RECOMMENDATIONS

In conclusion, the study recommends that school administration documents and policies should be available in vernacular languages and parents need training in school administration matters. For this reason, it is hoped that after training, the parents will participate meaningfully in the school administration activities. It was further recommended that since most parents are farm laborers, farm owners should allow them to attend the school governing body meetings during working days.

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