# Principals' Perceptions of the Influence of School Governing Bodies on Instructional Leadership: A South African Study

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**ABSTRACT** This paper reports on an empirical on-going study concerning how School Governing Bodies (SGBs) influence the instructional leadership roles of school principals. The literature on instructional leadership discusses the multiple roles that school principals are expected to perform but fails to analyse how the stakeholders in schools influence their work. This paper is based on a research project that departs from the premise that principals do not work in isolation or in a vacuum but in collaboration with other stakeholders, such as SGBs. The research approach used in this study was qualitative and data was collected from five schools, using semi-structured interviews. The findings of this study show that different principals tend to establish different types of relationships with their governing bodies and that they receive various levels of support. Positive relationship between principals and their governing bodies seem to play important supportive role that encourage instructional leadership.

## INTRODUCTION

The school principal is responsibility for school administration, managing infrastructure and teachers, the school's relationship with the community and instructional leadership as a core function (Prinsloo 2016). It seems that the role expectations of principals as instructional leaders describe an ideal situation while, in reality, there are contextual factors that determine how principals perform their instructional roles. The literature on instructional leadership reflects what principals do to promote curriculum implementation and organizational management for instructional improvement (Horing and Loeb 2010). As instructional leaders, school principals are expected to perform roles in curriculum implementation and in providing instruction. Instructional leadership seems to be central to the success of curriculum implementation because one of the main concerns of school principals is taking a lead in monitoring how teachers engage in teaching and learning activities. Calik et al. (2012) believed that principals who are instructional leaders encourage their teachers to be more effective in teaching and to have a high self-efficacy in their professional careers.

The scope of principals' instructional leadership activities varies from one school to the next. In some schools principals focus on the development of all the teachers while in other schools they target a few teachers for development (May and Supovitz 2011). The authors further stated that the development of teachers depends on the magnitude of their instructional commitment and an ability to grow in their profession (May and Supovitz 2011). Some principals perceive their role in curriculum implementation as supporting, facilitating and consolidating curriculum implementation activities (Omar et al. 2011). In another study, Wahlstrom and Louis (2008) maintained that teachers experience the leadership roles of their school principals in different ways. While some teachers perceive the instructional leadership role of the school principal as shared leadership in which there is collective decision-making on curriculum matters, others still look to the principal to provide guidance in curriculum implementation.

In South Africa the challenges of managing and leading schools in curriculum implementation, teaching and learning are exacerbated by the requirement to implement radical changes in the curriculum. School principals are required to take a leading role in guiding and motivating teachers in implementing changes in the curriculum (Omar et al. 2011). School principals are expected to work in collaboration with other stakeholders to ensure effective curriculum implementation. Section 16 (2) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 stipulates that school governing bodies (SGBs) must promote the best

interest of the child by providing high quality education (Prinsloo 2016). Such a responsibility demands that there should be a collaborative and supportive relationship among all stakeholders and, more particularly, between the governing body and the school principal.

The current study is based on the assumption that principals do not work alone in ensuring curriculum implementation but that they work in collaboration with other stakeholders, like School Governing Bodies (SGBs). This study integrates the literature on the instructional leadership of principals with that related to the role of governing bodies in providing quality education in order to establish how governing bodies influence the instructional role of principals. The South African Schools Act (SASA), Act 84 of 1996, indicates that SGBs should include school principals as *ex-officio* members, elected parents, teachers, non-teaching staff members and, in the case of high schools, student representatives. Section 16 of SASA specifies the powers of governing bodies and their roles and responsibilities which include managing school finances and determining fees to be charged; drawing up school admission and language policies; establishing subject choice options and the extra-mural curriculum of the schools; and devising the mission statements of their schools and the codes of conduct for the learners. In terms of teaching and learning SGBs have the power to recommend the appointment of staff members to the relevant education departments and to appoint and pay for additional teachers at their schools. Section 20 (1a) of SASA states that governing bodies of public schools must promote the best interests of the schools and strive to ensure their development through the provision of quality education for all learners. Section 20 (1e) requires that they should support the principals, educators and other staff members at their schools in the performance of their professional functions which includes curriculum implementation. Principals, as instructional leaders, are responsible for ensuring that quality teaching and learning takes place in their schools. The approach taken in this paper is that the nature of the instructional roles of principals may be determined by the collaboration and input of other stakeholders, such as SGBs.

According to Heystek (2004), principals and parental governors have different perceptions of the support action that is required to ensure effective and quality teaching and learning in schools. The misconception of the role of SGBs in supporting teaching and learning at times results in role conflict where SGB members attempt to usurp the professional responsibilities of the principals and the teachers (Heystek 2011). Heystek (2010) found that support from SGBs includes improving the reading skills of learners, financial and material support and giving time to educational support tasks, such as invigilation duties and being involved in fundraising for educational purposes. Although SASA clearly outlines the responsibilities of SGBs, schools in South African are diverse in terms of human and financial resources and their ability to implement different policies at school level (Christie 2010). For example, in some former White and Indian schools, the SGBs are well positioned in terms of human and material resources and they are better able to support their schools in curriculum implementation by employing additional teachers, supplementing salaries and enabling a diverse curriculum (Christie 2010). Former White schools are, mostly, located in better socio-economic areas and, generally, they have more educated parents than former non-White schools (Heystek 2011). In such schools, SGB members are often professionals with a higher education; they are more competent and highly motivated to support and promote the best interest of their schools (Mncube 2009; Heystek 2010).

The education levels of parent members of governing bodies and their socio-economic status play an important role in their ability to execute their expected functions. In formerly disadvantaged schools most parent members of the governing bodies are often illiterate; they lack the required knowledge, skills and experience of governing as well as time and resources to travel to meetings (Heystek 2006; Mncube 2009; Christie 2010). Another problem is SGBs' lack of knowledge, skills and exposure to what is expected of them in their involvement in improving the quality of education - especially in under-performing schools (Heystek 2010). The SGB members' lack of formal education was also viewed by the teachers in the study by Bayat et al. (2014) as a reason for their inability to perform their expected roles. Despite the identified challenges of governance in schools, some studies show that even illiterate parents are able to contribute to the quality education of the learners if they are trained to do what is expected of

them and they are given an opportunity to play their governing roles (Prew 2009).

The roles of principals and SGBs in ensuring high quality teaching and learning are intertwined and there is no demarcation between them (Heystek 2004; Christie 2010). While principals play leadership and management roles in the day-to-day organization of teaching and learning by working closely with the teachers, SGBs are involved in teacher appointments and they are responsible for the choice of subjects available in their schools. The majority of principals in a study by Botha (2012) strongly believed that their main responsibility was to manage teaching and learning and they considered contributions made by SGBs to be valuable in terms of school effectiveness and in positive learner achievement.

Heystek (2010) suggested that SGBs are expected to promote quality education by creating a positive school climate and by establishing good relationships with other stakeholders in the schools. The extent to which SGB members play their roles and exercise their powers is limited by the resources and the category of their schools - among other factors. In South Africa there are different categories of schools and some schools have more human and material resources than others. The National Norms for School Funding (Department of Education 2006) divides schools into five quintiles that are differentiated by the size of the funds that the state allocates to the schools - based on the poverty levels of the schools.

Quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools are in poor areas where parents are not expected to pay school fees and the Department of Education supplies these schools with funds by allocating R738 per year for each enrolled child (Department of Education 2006). Heystek (2011) asserted that the state funds provided to Quintile 1, 2 and 3 schools may not be sufficient to enable their governing bodies to provide quality education. Another challenge is the inability of parent members of SGBs in no-fee paying schools to manage funds in order to provide resources that would ensure high-quality education compared to SGB members in Quintile 4 and 5 schools that are in more affluent areas and are considered to be self-managing schools. In Quintile 4 and 5 schools SGB members are more involved in improving the quality of curriculum implementation by providing adequate teaching and learning resources. Heystek (2011) believed that in self-managing schools the SGBs have the power to manage school funds and also that they are under more pressure to improve the quality of education.

## Context of the Study

Five schools in the Capricorn District in Limpopo Province were selected as data collection sites. The schools are refer to as School A, B, C, D and E and the principals from each school are identified by the same letters, Principal A.B,C,D and E, to protect the identities of the schools and the principals. The schools are classified according to different quintiles (Norms and Standards 2006).

**School A** is a former Model C fee-paying school. The school has 1000 diverse learners, mostly from the surrounding township and villages. It has 38 teachers; 6 are employed by the SGB and 32 are employed by the Department of Education. The school, which is situated in an area where parents are either illiterate or semi-illiterate, offers teaching in different languages, like Sepedi and English. Some of the learners are from families with welfare challenges and discipline is a problem; there is also a lack of family collaboration and commitment to schooling. Members of the school community are of different races and denominations which causes a tension in the relationship between the principal and the community. Most of the school funds are spent on infrastructure, such as furniture and the maintenance of buildings. The principal from this school is referred to as Principal A.

**School B** is an Afrikaans medium school where teaching and learning takes place in Afrikaans. The school is classified as Quintile 5 with 1300 learners. It has a total of 70 teachers of which 45 are employed by the Department of Education and 25 are employed by the governing body. The school offers 18 subjects and a variety of extra-curricular activities. This school's parent community is involved in the activities of the school to ensure that high quality teaching and learning takes place. The parent members of the SGB support the school by providing teaching and learning materials which include access to the use of technology in the classrooms where teachers have laptops; WI-FI is also available in the school.

**School C** is a Quintile 5 school with 60 teachers; 49 are employed by the government and 11 are paid by the SGB. The school has 1400 learners who are from diverse racial groups and have different learning abilities and 5 percent are international learners from neighbouring countries. In this school there are two deputy principals: one manages the General Education & Training Band (GET) and the other the Further Education & Training Band (FET). The school community consist mostly of supportive working middle-class parents. There are a few learners from the rural area who attend the school but they struggle to get to the school every morning due to transport difficulties.

**School D** is a comprehensive school built by a former MEC of Education with the aim to present an inclusive curriculum with Science, Technology and commercial subjects, amongst others. It was originally a Quintile 5 school but is now a Quintile 4 one. The school has 32 teachers; 6 are employed by the School Governing Body and the total is 38. There are 940 learners and the school offers tuition from Grades 8 to 12. Most of the learners have to travel to this school even though they are from a nearby township where there are Quintile 1 and 2 schools. The school is divorced from the community because only a few parents are from the area as most of the parents live in more distance areas; the school does not have a defined school community because the learners are from different communities.

**School E** is a Quintile 3 no-fee paying school that depends on a subsidy from the Department of Education - as stipulated in the Norms and Standards for Funding Schools (2006). The school has 971 learners and 28 teachers. It is a dual/parallel medium school, with Afrikaans, English and Sepedi speaking learners. It is in a previously predominant coloured township. As the school is poor, it lacks school funds for teaching and learning resources. Principal E is a newly appointed principal to that school with less than one years' experience as a school principal.

## RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

This study used a qualitative approach within an interpretive paradigm (Creswell 2014). Data was generated using semi-structured interviews in order to gain an understanding of the perceptions and experiences of the various principals regarding the involvement of SGBs in supporting teaching and learning. The semi-structured interviews enabled the researcher to have a conversation with the participants and probe their responses for clarity and depth (Flick 2011). Each interview lasted between 45 minutes and one hour; they were audio-taped and then transcribed *verbatim*. The instruction and questions guiding the interviews were:

- Describe your working relationship with your School Governing Body.
- What kind of support do you receive from your School Governing Body's members?
- What are some of the challenges that you experience in your leadership role in teaching and learning?

To ensure the credibility of the study the researcher developed a rapport and a trust relationship with the participants at the beginning of the interviews. During the interviews the researcher probed for more detailed responses and clarified apparent contradictions (Creswell 2014). The ethical aspects of case study research design that were observed included protecting participants' anonymity, privacy and confidentiality; ensuring that the participants' right to withdraw at any time; guaranteeing their voluntary participation; protecting them from physical and psychological harm; and preventing deception. The ethical guidelines followed included obtaining informed consent from the principals.

## RESULTS

In this study the researcher used a content analysis approach to analyse the data (Creswell 2009). The data obtained from the semi-structured interviews was transcribed *verbatim* and coded. Creswell (2014) described coding as a process of organizing the data into segments of text before bringing meaning to the information. The process of coding assigns tags, names or labels to pieces of data (Punch 2009). The tags are arranged in categories which eventually lead to sub-themes and themes (Cohen et al. 2007). The emerging themes were aligned with the research questions. The following themes were identified from the findings.

### Working Relationships with School Governing Bodies

The majority of the principals interviewed had positive perceptions of their working rela-

tionships with their SGBs. The following are 2 examples of what the principals said:

*The relationship with the School Governing Body is sound. We rely on them on the issue of governance and support* (Principal C).

*In my planning I involve not only the teachers but also School Governing Body because they are responsible for governance and nothing can be planned without finances even the school improvement and development needs finances and that is where the School Governing Body comes in* (Principal A).

The quotations show that the principals have a clear understanding of the role of the SGB and the need to work collaboratively with the body. There is also an awareness of the responsibility of the SGB in managing school finances. Some of the principals also appreciate the physical presence of SGB members and the role they play in attending to school matters. Principals A and C said:

*I do not have problems with the School Governing Body. The chairperson of the School Governing Body is forever here. Whatever challenge we face, they are here with us* (Principal A).

*Our School Governing Body chair person would grace the occasion when he is invited, he is never absent. He is there for us* (Principal C).

There seems to be a close partnership relationship between the two principals and the chairpersons of the SGBs. As the leader of the governing body, the chairperson appears to be responsible for closing the gap between governance and management by being physically present in the school when needed. The relationship between the SGBs and the schools seems to be collaborative and supportive.

In School B there are different portfolios, such as finance and academic, for which different members of the SGB are responsible. The responsibilities of the members of the SGB are structured in the form of committees that are responsible and accountable for different aspects of the school and which report on the progress of their portfolio. According to Principal B,

*The School Governing Body has a committee which is called academics. There is a member elected by the School Governing Body who is heading that portfolio and he would come and talk to my HODs or the deputy principal.*

*He would come  and  in advance and ask me what are the academic result , show me the figures, he is also involved in all the electronic developments like smart board, new data projectors, new computers system. He is involved in that and reports to the governing body in that particular meeting* (Principal B).

The role played by the SGB at different schools seems to be determined by the socio-economic context of the schools. In Quintile 5 schools, like School B, members of the SGB seem to be more supportive of the principal in monitoring teaching and learning. The differentiated roles played by specific members of the SGB in School B suggest highly structured and specialised responsibilities; this can only be possible in schools where parents have a knowledge of, and expertise in, managing specific portfolios. In such schools the members of SGBs on different committees may have a different type of relationship with teachers and the principal. Power and accountability responsibilities seem to be shared between the principal, teachers and SGB members. However, SGB members in schools with lower socio-economic status may not be able to give much support to the principal and the teachers due to lack of knowledge, expertise and financial support. This may influence the power and accountability of members of the SGB.

## Kind of Support from School Governing Bodies

The participants in the current study cited different kinds of support that they received from their SGBs. One support area identified by the participants is the motivation of learners in terms of academic performance by acknowledging their efforts in the form of rewards. One principal said:

*Financing events such as Best Academic Achievement Awards, they give the learners money according to the number of distinctions for example R250 per distinction so four distinction would be R 1000* (Principal C).

The use of some tangible monetary reward could be a way of recognizing and appreciating the efforts of the learners and also encouraging others to aim for an improved performance. It also shows the commitment of SGB members to teaching and learning. There was some recognition of the support of SGBs in the use of technology to facilitate curriculum implementation in School B:

*We have new computers and 20 laptops for teachers. We have a programme that allows teachers to buy laptops and pay it off. The governing body gets involved by approving school funds to be used buying laptops for the teachers who pay monthly instalments and they can start working on it* (Principal B).

*If we want new structure for example this telecommunication system, when I came here there was only one telephone in the whole school. It was connected to a long wire and we had to run around to the class if the teacher had a call. So, I got quotations and presented this to the School Governing Body and they provided us with a telephone line* (Principal E).

The two quotations, given above, show how SGBs prioritize their needs depending on the schools' context and the socio-economic status in different quintiles. While in one Quintile 5 school the SGB finances technological infrastructure, in another Quintile 3 school the focus is on addressing basic means of communication, such as the use of the telephone.

## Challenges Experienced by School Principals as Instructional Leaders

The findings of this study show that in some schools with only a few teachers, principals perform the dual roles of leader and teacher when a teacher is absent from school:

*I am also a relief educator for many teachers who are absent. Sometimes when they are absent, I just take their period and continue with the class. I teach most classes' maths* (Principal A).

*I do not have enough teachers. The department is not giving us teachers* (Principal D).

The dual roles played by the principal as instructional leader and teacher could be both an advantage and disadvantage at the same time. The advantage is that the principal has an opportunity to interact with the learners during teaching and learning while the disadvantage could be that teaching is an extra burden in addition to the leadership and management roles of the principal. The findings also suggest that the Department of Education and not the SGB should be held accountable for ensuring that there are enough teachers in the schools.

Another problem identified by the principals as instructional leaders was that some teachers lack motivation, interest in and commitment to their teaching:

*As an instructional leader, my experience is that we have teachers who are not really passionate of teaching. You can walk in class and find the teacher just sitting down busy with either a cell phone or a laptop or a new paper then you can call the teacher outside and reprimand him* (Principal D).

*Where there is ill-discipline the teacher is not able to work with the learners or the teacher goes to class unprepared. I always tell them that if a teacher goes to class unprepared there is going to be a lot of disturbances and interruption* (Principal A).

Although there were examples of some SGBs encouraging and motivating learners to work harder to achieve a better academic performance, there appears to be a lack of support from the SGBs for the teachers' implementation of the curriculum. From the findings it seems that in some schools the principals have to address the attitude of the teachers who are not motivated, interested and committed to teaching. The lack of motivation displayed by the teachers in this study could be as a result of a lack of incentives, support or close monitoring of what is expected of them.

The findings of this study also show that the principals involved in this study expect material support, such as furniture and books, from the Department of Education and not from SGBs. Principal A suggested:

*The only problem in this province is lack of support from the department of education. If you go to other schools they will also complain of lack of support from the department. We ask many questions like – Why they are not providing furniture to school? A chunk of our money is spent on infrastructure and not on curriculum because learners cannot learn in an environment that is not conducive for learning* (Principal A).

*We do not get textbooks if we get them, we get them late. If you get them they are not the progressive ones for example we would like to have platinum for grade 10. For grades 11 we would like to have the same type of books but now for grade 10 they give us platinum for grade 11 they give us from a different publisher* (Principal B).

Although all the principals in this study talked of positive working relationships with their SGBs, there seems to be limited support emanating from the SGBs in terms of the provi-

sion of material resources for teaching and learning and creating an effective teaching and learning environment. The Department of Education is expected to provide a great deal of support for effective teaching and learning to take place. The findings of this study suggest that the principals perceive the need for positive interpersonal relationships between the principals, teachers and SGB members as an important factor in enhancing their instructional leadership role. The lack of provision of teaching and learning resources and infrastructure by the Department of Education are perceived as challenges experienced by the principals as instructional leaders.

## DISCUSSION

The current study examined the perceptions of principals regarding the influence of SGBs on instructional leadership. According to the principals' narrations, there are several ways in which SGBs positively influence teaching and learning in schools. This finding is in contrast to that of another study by Bayat et al. (2014) which reported on conflict between the members of the SGB, the principals and some of the teachers and how the poor relationship has a negative impact on teaching, learning and the functioning of the SGB. However, it may be argued that some members of SGBs appear to be highly committed, responsible and accountable in supporting their principals and their schools to ensure effective teaching and learning. The members of SGBs in such schools seem to be more skilled, confident and empowered in terms of what is expected of them and what they are able to do. They are, generally, found in Quintile 5 schools which are classified as schools with parent communities of a higher socio-economic status. The SGBs in these schools are more motivated in ensuring effective teaching and learning in their school (Heystek 2011) whereas in other schools the support from members of the SGBs is limited - possibly due to context of the schools and their lower socio-economic status. Xaba (2011) found that due to their low levels of education some members of SGBs are unable to fulfil the roles expected of them and, therefore, their support for instructional leadership may be limited. The socio-economic status and educational background of members of SGBs seems to have an influence on the relationship between the members of SGBs and school principals.

The findings of this study show that the kind of support that school principals receive from members of the SGBs is varied. In some schools members of the SGBs are more involved in curriculum implementation activities than in other schools. In such schools, they have a direct influence on the teaching and learning that takes place in the schools and on the role of the principal as an instructional leader. Some school communities seem to have broad expectations of support from their SGBs while others perceive the SGBs' role mainly as to develop policies and manage school finances. In their study, Bayat et al. (2014) also found that the support that principals expected from their SGBs was related to financial matters and developing policies - not teaching and learning. Another way in which the principals perceived support from the SGBs in the current study was indirectly through an awards system that aimed at motivating higher academic achievement in learners. Although the learners were encouraged to achieve better academic results, the principals talked of teachers feeling demotivated and, at times, did not teach as was expected of them. The findings of this study concurs with those of Bayat et al. (2014) who reported that some of the teachers who participated in their study were demotivated because they felt that some members of the SGBs did not appreciate or respected the efforts that they put into their teaching. Other indirect forms of influence of SGBs involve making recommendations to the Department of Education to provide for the needs of the schools which have been identified by the principals.

In terms of the challenges experienced by the principals as instructional leaders, the findings of this study show that all the principals experience staffing as problematic and expect the Department of Education to provide an adequate number of teachers for their schools. In the no-fee paying schools involved in this study it seems that the SGBs do not have the capacity to employ additional teachers or to provide the physical and learning resources needed by the schools. The ability of members of SGB to influence the principals' role in managing teaching and learning appears to be limited in no-fee paying schools. However, in Quintile 5 schools their influence seems to be stronger which is evident in their appointment of teachers - due to the

schools' better financial status (Heystek 2011). These SGBs are also more involved in school activities which include the provision of integrated technology systems to enhance teaching and learning. An increase in teaching and learning responsibilities makes members of SGBs more accountable for instructional activities that take place in their schools.

## CONCLUSION

The study was driven by the assumption that members of SGBs have a role to play in influencing principals' leadership in teaching and learning. In the context of this study, the findings show the importance of SGB involvement and support in different aspects that enhance teaching and learning and curriculum delivery. The research largely confirms that different schools have different requirements and levels of support from governing bodies. The SGBs in self-managing Quintile 5 schools appear to have more influence and access to opportunities to support the instructional leadership roles of principals when compared to Quintile 3 schools. Despite the differing levels and kinds of support from governing bodies there is strong evidence that positive relationships between principals and governing bodies play important supportive roles and determine the influence that the SGBs have on the instructional leadership roles of school principals.

## IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The conclusions drawn from the findings of the study suggest the following implications and recommendations:

- Working in collaboration with the members of SGBs leads to positive relationships between principals and SGBs which results in a positive influence on the leadership roles of the principals and, therefore, this should be encouraged.
- Although the nature of the support received from SGBs may differ from one school to another, principals should not feel that they are working alone but rather that there is collaboration with other stakeholders.
- The different ways in which SGBs could support the instructional leadership role of

principals - even in schools with limited human, physical and teaching/learning resources - should be explored.
- More collaboration between SGBs and the Department of Education in providing support for quality education may strengthen the ability of principals to perform their instructional leadership role and this should be encouraged.

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