

## Exploring Rural School Parents' Knowledge of School Governance

M.A.N. Duma

*University of Zululand, Private Bag X1001, KwaDlangezwa 3886, Republic of South Africa  
Telephone: (27) 035 9026495, (27) 0736745439; Fax: (27) 086 6514459;  
E-mail: [dumaM@unizulu.ac.za](mailto:dumaM@unizulu.ac.za)*

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this paper is to explore the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws in South Africa. An argument is presented that the understanding of the legal frameworks pertaining to school governance begins with the parents' knowledge of education laws that affect school governance. This paper reports on a study in which quantitative methodology was used to obtain information from rural school parents about their knowledge of school governance laws in South Africa. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for rural school parents to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance laws to understand the legal processes and principles and determine the legality of their decisions in schools.

### INTRODUCTION

Many countries have established education laws to include parents in the governance of schools (Hill and Taylor 2014). The parent component in school governance is designed to bring about the democratization of education, which encompasses the idea that parents, as one of major stakeholders in schools, should be able to participate in the administration of the schools, which can be realized by the establishment of school governing bodies in which the number of parents comprises one more than the total of other members of a governing body who have voting rights (Duma 2013).

The fragmentation of the old South African education system along racial lines, entrenched the manner in which parent governors' involvement in school governance existed. Under the apartheid regime, the participation of parents in school governance was limited and exclusive. The role of parents was limited to that of backbenchers and fundraisers only. The present situation demands that all schools including rural schools must have democratically elected parents in school governing bodies (Duma 2013). In this instance, parents, who previously had no legal authority on issues of school governance, are now legally required to be involved in the governance activities of schools. This paper aims to investigate the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws.

This paper reports on a study in which quantitative methodology was used to obtain information from rural school parents about their knowledge of education laws that have a founding impact on school governance. First, the background to the study is provided, next, the school governance laws in South Africa and research problem are presented and the method of investigation and results are discussed. Finally, the implications of the findings are outlined.

### Background to the Study

There are literally hundreds of books, journal papers, and stand-alone reports on the subject of parent involvement in education. These writings include research reports, expert opinions, theory papers, program descriptions, and so forth (Monadjem 2003; Mncube 2008). However, a cross-section of the field of education management reveals that very little research has been conducted on rural schools with regard to the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws. Scientific studies on this research problem are not yet available. The dearth 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 to this issue. This study seeks to fill this gap, and it is in this regard that the current research is deemed as an exploratory enterprise in South Africa specifically, and in the whole world gen-

erally. It is hoped that this study will make a great contribution to the improvement of school governance in rural schools.

The research studies have revealed that many governments have recognised the need for legislations to ensure that parents are intensively involved in school governance (Monadjem 2003; Mncube 2007, 2009). This recognition is based on the realisation that parents have a right to play an active role in their children's education, and that parents may help alleviate some of the problems faced by learners (Monadjem 2003). Duma (2009) observed that parents are first-line clients of the school and should be drawn into school activities not only in terms of auxiliary tasks, but also in the school management functions such as planning and organising, leading, controlling, and so forth.

One of the prime examples of the constitutionalization of the South African education was the democratization of school governance. As a background to this study, this section therefore is to focus on education laws enacted to democratize the governance of schools in South Africa.

The National Education Policy Act: Act No. 27 of 1996 outlined the organization, management, and governance of schools. It stipulated that the 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 (Oosthuizen 2004). This Act, for the first time provided for the need of parent involvement in school governance matters.

*Education White Paper 2: General Notice 130 of 1996* sets out the policy of the government on the governance of schools, and the development of capacity for school leadership throughout the country. It also aimed at providing an acceptable framework for the achievement of a truly democratic school governance system in a diverse society. The White Paper included a major role for parents in school governance, to be exercised in the spirit of a partnership between the state and a local community. Each public school would represent a partnership between the state and the local community. This concept was of fundamental value in reconciling the respective responsibilities of the government and the community. It was the basis for reconstructing the system of public education.

The essence of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 was to transform education in South Africa away from the iniquitous policies of the past. Its main thrust was the normal-

ization of the South African education system; the advancement of the democratic transformation of the country; the combating of racism, sexism and all forms of unfair discrimination; the promotion of the rights of learners, educators and parents and most significantly, the involvement of parents in school governance (RSA 1996).

Democratisation of school governance as stipulated in South African Schools Act calls upon the parents to promote the best interests of the school, adopt a school constitution, develop the mission statement of the school, adopt a code of conduct for learners at the school, support the principal, educators and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions, recommend to the Head of Department the employment of educators and non-educator staff at the school and determine the extra-mural curriculum of the school and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy (RSA 1996).

It is therefore important to mention that parents that are ignorant of the legislations and policies that have a founding impact on school governance are a liability to the school, as they do not effect school governance duties.

## METHODOLOGY

### Research Problem

Decentralized governance within the school system requires that the parents play a vital role in school governance matters. However, Duma (2013) observed that there were wide varieties that may inhibit positive parent participation in school governance, such as the educational background of the parents, socio-economic conditions and the absence of capacity building programmes for parents.

The following research problem was identified:

What is the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws in South Africa?

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, the research instruments, 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 rural school parents in each circuit of Sisonke and UMgun-gundlovu districts as respondents. Since these two districts have eight circuits, 200 parents who could answer questionnaires in English were selected as respondents. 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. This quantitative methodology was chosen in the light of the purpose of the study, the kind of information that was required and the available resources (Kumar 2014). The researcher believed that this kind of survey would lead to some truths about rural school parents' knowledge of education laws that impact on school governance and it would provide information on whether certain generalisations presented in the literature were also true for this population.

### **Format of the Questionnaire**

The questionnaire was divided into three 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 the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws. The respondents were asked to rate their responses

according to the following scale: *Good, Average, Poor*.

Section 3 also had closed questions, focusing on the reflexive competence of the rural school parents' working knowledge of school governance laws. Questions in this section were operationalized using the four-point scale and the respondents were asked to rate their response according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree*.

Section 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein parent governors had to mention problems they encounter in school governance and had to suggest what could be done to improve their understanding of the legislations and policies that impact on 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 questionnaire, so there was no need to modify it. In the main study, 200 schools were randomly selected and principals were requested to distribute the questionnaire to a parent whose literacy level was sufficient for him or her to complete it. It was felt that principals would be in a position to identify such parents.

The first sample population responses were 146 (73%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 24 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total responses of 170 (85 %) respondents. 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**

### **General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents**

When the item of parent governors' qualifications was analyzed, 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: Educational background of rural school parents**

<i>Education qualification</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
No formal schooling	110	65
Below grade 12	34	20
Above grade 12	26	15
Total	170	100

Table 1 revealed that a high proportion of rural school parents had no formal schooling. 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 (Duma 2009). The high illiteracy and semi-literacy 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 has been identified as one of the biggest barriers to parent involvement in school governance. The education background of parents prohibits them from making significant contributions in school governance matters as some decisions on policy level need trained and competent people.

### The Rural School Parents' Knowledge of School Governance Laws

Table 2 focused on the rural school parents' knowledge of the education laws that impact on school governance. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Good, Average and Poor*.

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the National Education Policy Act

Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated their knowledge of the National Education Policy Act as poor. This Act outlines the organisation, management, and governance of schools and it provides for the need of parent involvement in school governance matters. 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 school governance tasks if their knowledge of this Act is poor. Intervention in the form of training workshops is inevitable.

**Table 2: The rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws**

<i>Items</i>		<i>Good</i>	<i>Ave- rage</i>	<i>Poor</i>	<i>Total</i>
National Education Policy Act	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100
Education White Paper 2	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100
South African Schools Act	N	0	68	102	170
	%	0	40	60	100
School Budget Policy	N	17	17	136	170
	%	10	10	80	100
School Language Policy	N	0	34	136	170
	%	0	20	80	100
School Admission Policy	N	17	17	136	170
	%	10	10	80	100
School Religious Policy	N	17	17	136	170
	%	10	10	80	100

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the Education White Paper 2

Again, Table 2 again revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the Education White Paper was poor. This document sets out the policy of the government on the governance of schools, and the development of capacity for school leadership and governance throughout the country. The envisaged outcomes of this document, among other things were to enable parent governors to determine the mission and character or ethos of their schools and recommend educators' appointments to the provincial department (RSA 1996). Once again, the responsibilities implied by this document pose a difficult task for the illiterate and semi-literate parents.

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the South African Schools Act

More than half of the respondents (60%) as indicated in Table 2 reportedly had a poor knowledge of the South African Schools Act. This Act is the engine of school governance. It deals with the most important school governance matters. It is the de facto kingpin of parents' involvement in school governance as it contains the composition, duties, functions, rights and powers of parents. It is therefore ironic that the majority of parents reported to have a poor knowl-

edge of the "engine power" of school governance. Monadjem (2003) astutely points out that parents should transform schools into organisations that are participative. This transformation must encourage shared responsibility and a leadership style that cultivates and fosters an interactive working environment. It is therefore incumbent on the Department of Basic Education to assist the parents to get to know as much as possible about the South African Schools Act and its implications for school governance.

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the school's budget policy

Table 2 further revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school budget was poor. The Schools Act places the responsibility for the financial management of the school in the hands of the school governing body (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005). Parents are expected to draft and control the school budget. This suggests that the parents are required to possess financial competencies in order to execute their financial management duties. Since most parents are not capable of managing the school finances, most schools do not have accountable and transparent financial management systems (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005).

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the school's language policy

It seems that the parents in this study have very little knowledge of the school language policy. As seen from Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school's language policy was poor. This implies that although the South African Schools Act, Section 21(1) (b) demands that parent governors choose the language to be used for teaching and learning, parents in this study did not participate in determining the school language policy.

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the school's admission policy.

Table 2 further on reveals that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that their knowledge of the school admission policy was poor. Monadjem (2003) points out, that in terms of the South African Schools Act; the parents 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.

Tsotetsi (2005) points out that the principals must inform parents of the learners admitted to a school of their rights and obligations, such as that education is a right not a privilege, admission tests are illegal and the payment of school fees is not compulsory.

- ♦ The rural school parents' knowledge of the school's religious policy

In conclusion, Table 3 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (80%) reportedly had a poor knowledge of the school's religious policy. This policy, according to Tsotetsi (2005), provides a framework for schools to determine their own religious policies. Parents lay down the rules for religious observances at the school. These observances, according to Monadjem (2003) are regular meetings such as school opening ceremonies, where, for example, scripture readings, prayer and religious singing take place. Attendance at these observances for teachers and learners is free and voluntary (RSA 1996).

### **The Reflexive Competence of the Rural School Parents' Knowledge School Governance Laws**

The statements in Table 3 were added to cross validate the responses summarised in Table 2. This was part of the triangulation strategy followed in this study. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree and Strongly Disagree*.

- ♦ Learners whose parents fail to pay school fees must not be admitted to school

Table 3 revealed that more than half of the respondents (59%) indicated that they agreed with the statement that learners whose parents fail to pay school fees must not be admitted to school. This is expected of parents who indicated in Table 2 that their knowledge of the school admission policy is poor. The admission policy stipulates that the school must not discriminate against learners, who must be admitted even if their parents cannot pay school fees.

- ♦ School principals are allowed to increase the school fees if there is need

As shown in Table 3, the majority of the respondents (65%) agreed that school principals are allowed to increase the school fees if there is need. The same respondents indicated in Table 2 that their knowledge of the school budget policy was poor. The policy places the responsibility

**Table 3: The reflexive competence of the rural school parents' knowledge of school governance laws**

<i>Items</i>		<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Disagree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Learners whose parents fail to pay school fees must not be admitted to school	N	70	31	17	52	170
	%	41	18	10	31	100
School principals are allowed to increase fees if there is a need	N	58	52	43	17	170
	%	34	31	25	10	100
Parents must decide the medium of instruction in schools	N	43	58	17	52	170
	%	25	34	10	31	100
Parents are not compelled to serve in school governing bodies	N	82	45	31	12	170
	%	48	27	18	7	100
All learners must attend religious morning assembly in school	N	88	58	24	0	170
	%	52	34	14	0	100

ty for the financial management of the school in the hands of the school governing body, not in school principals. The management of the school finances is an important function of the school governing body.

- ♦ Parents must decide the medium of instruction in the school

Table 3 also revealed that more than half of the respondents (56%) did not agree that parents must decide on the medium of instruction in the school. Again, such a response was expected, taking into account the fact that these respondents had indicated in Table 2 that their knowledge of the language policy was poor. The language policy demands that school governing bodies choose the language to be used for teaching and learning. The factors that play a role in deciding the language policy include the majority of learners who use that language and the ability of the educators to teach that particular language.

- ♦ Parents are not compelled to serve in school governing bodies

Table 3 further on revealed that a majority of the respondents (75%) agreed with the statement that parents are not compelled to serve in school governing bodies. This response is a cause for a worry as the National Education Policy Act, Education White Paper 2 and the South African Schools Act clearly state that parents are paramount stakeholders in school governance activities and legally bound to serve in school governing bodies (RSA 1996).

- ♦ All learners must attend religious morning assembly in school

In conclusion, Table 3 showed that a majority of the respondents (86%) agreed that all learners must attend religious morning assembly in

school. The strong support for this item indicates that parents are not aware of School Religious Policy and Section 15 of the South African Schools Act, which stipulate that the attendance of religious observances in a school is free and voluntary (Clarke 2007).

## DISCUSSION

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:

- ♦ School governance documents such, as the South African Schools Act, are in English with no vernacular version available
- ♦ Training is not provided in school governance matters
- ♦ Most parents are rural labourers, and employers do not allow them to attend the school governing body meetings on work-days
- ♦ Principals dominate meetings and ignore suggestions from parent governors

In another open –ended question, respondents were required to make suggestions on what can be done to improve their knowledge understanding of school governance laws. Their responses are incorporated under the recommendation section.

## CONCLUSION

The study explored the rural school parents' knowledge of education laws that influence school governance. The importance of parent governors in schools cannot be overemphasiz-

es, since they are responsible for the formulation, development, implementation, and review of the school policies. Parents are therefore indispensable assets and resources in the successful formulation and implementation of school policies, the role of parent governors in schools should be recognized as that of important decision makers.

In this study, it has been reported that a high proportion of rural school parents have little or no knowledge of school governance laws and no particular attention to their training in the education laws is evident, yet they are expected to make decisions, which warrant their understanding of the legal principles and processes. It is therefore important to mention that parents who may not be familiar with school governance laws could be a liability to the school rather than asset in effective school governance.

In conclusion, it should be mentioned that it is essential for rural school parents 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, the study outlined the rural school parents' suggestions on ways of improving their knowledge of school governance laws, which included, among others, the following: the writing of training manuals in the indigenous language, provision of translation services for parents who know only the indigenous language and offering of transportation to parents to attend training workshops which must be organized by the department of education.

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