Identifying Factors Driving and/or Inhibiting Participative Decision Making in Public Schools: Principals' Perspectives

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on a study conducted to identify factors driving and/or inhibiting participative decision making in public schools. Using the qualitative research method, the researcher investigated the extent to which principals, who are studying towards the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), were engaged in participative decision making in their schools. The study revealed that in many Free State public schools, principals do not engage school governing bodies (SGBs) in participative decision making. A number of inhibiting factors emerged, such as the school governing body's lack of knowledge about governance and policy development, poor literacy levels, the abdication of their power to the principal and the dominance of principals over school governing bodies. It is recommended that both principals and SGBs should receive relevant and appropriate training with regard to participative decision making.

INTRODUCTION

Governments around the world are introducing a range of strategies aimed at improving delivery of education services. One such strategy is to decentralise decision making by increasing parental involvement in schools (Chen 2011: 2). Chen (2011: 2) further asserts that decentralising decision-making authority to parents and communities fosters demand and ensures that schools provide the social and economic benefits that best reflect the priorities and values of the local communities. On assuming the reins of government in 1994, the African National Congress (1994: 60) envisaged that democratic school governance structures were needed to redress the imbalances of the past. This move was motivated by the need to dismantle the previously centralised, bureaucratic and authoritarian management of schools and to replace it with a democratic system which conforms to the democratic principles of access, redress, equity and democracy. These reforms are reflective of worldwide attempts to restructure and deregulate state schooling and to create devolved systems of education entailing significant degrees of institutional autonomy and a variety of forms

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of school-based management (SBM), administration and governance (Naidoo 2005: 2). Bush (2007) states in this regard that participative leadership emphasises group decision making, democratic principles and leadership contributions of all stakeholders in the context of SBM.

With regard to the above, the South African Constitution includes an unequivocal commitment to representative and participatory democracy, incorporating the concepts of accountability, transparency and public involvement (Republic of South Africa (RSA) 2006: 394). Smit and Oosthuizen (2011: 60) expand further by stating that participatory democracy refers to a form of direct democracy that enables all members of society to participate in decision-making processes within institutions (such as schools), organisations and government structures. Furthermore, the directive principle in section 4(m) of the National Education Policy Act (RSA 1996a) contains the democratic requirement that the national minister of education must ensure broad public participation in the development of education by including stakeholders (SGBs) in policymaking and governance in the education system (RSA 1996a).

The South African School's Act, No. 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996b), commonly referred to as SASA, gave formal effect to a participative form of democracy by redistributing power to the school governing bodies (SGBs).

SASA, as a policy framework for education reform in South Africa, makes provision for,

amongst other, the democratic management and governance of public schools through governance structures (SGBs) which are democratically elected to foster active and responsible roles and to promote issues relating to democracy, including tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision making (Mokoena 2012: 43). The SGB of a public school consists of parents of children at the school, educators and non-educator personnel, learners (in the case of secondary schools), co-opted members of the community, and the principal as an ex-officio member of the SGB. The SGB is composed in such a manner that the parent component of the SGB should be one parent member more than the rest of the committee members. Furthermore, it is important to note that the principal of a public school plays a dual role in the school; firstly, as an employee of the Department of Education (DoE) reporting to the head of the department (HoD) and secondly, as an ex-officio member of the SGB (Joubert and Bray 2007: 40).

The Department of Education (DoE) expected that the arrangements towards greater autonomy, as discussed above, would result in several benefits for learners, educators, administrators and school communities (DoE 1997). Through democratic reform, the DoE also envisaged a single school system in South Africa, in which principals and school governing bodies could take decisions together to improve the quality of education in schools.

Traditionally, principals around the world have been the main decision makers at school level (Mokoena 2012: 1). With the devolution of power to school level, more participative decision making and responsibilities were devolved to the SGBs. However, this new situation led to many principals resisting sharing decision-making power with their SGBs, because they had become used to having all the power to manage their schools (Bush 2011: 77; Mokoena 2012: 1). Naicker and Mestry (2013: 9) suggest that principals in a new democracy should share decision-making power with all the stakeholders. This implies that principals need to learn how to share power and decision making with stakeholders. In agreement with the aforementioned authors, Bush (2007) denotes that South African principals, in the context of post-modernism, should embrace the views of all stakeholders and move away from relying on hierarchical structures. Starrat (cited in Bush 2007) opines that a more inclu-

sive participative and consultative approach is appropriate for a democratic South Africa.

Despite the fact that SASA, as discussed above, calls for active involvement of all stakeholders in all aspects of decision-making processes at schools, research has shown that some principals allow little or no participation in decision-making processes at schools. Numerous authors confirm that decision-making vested in the principal previously, but that he/she no longer possesses exclusively has the power of managing the school and taking all the decisions on his/her own, because SGBs have been elected to govern schools (Heystek 2004: 150; McLellan 1996: 44; Mestry 2006: 28; Mokoena 2011: 120; Mokoena 2012: 1). The results from a study conducted by Naicker and Mestry (2013: 6) revealed that traditional management practices, with a strong hierarchical structure and principals who use autocratic leadership styles present powerful barriers to participative decision making. These authors further state that power and decision making in an entrenched hierarchy remain the domain of the principal and the management team (SMT). This may imply that principals still have the power and authority to make decisions about the school themselves, which reflects an autocratic form of management.

The researcher, lecturing to deputy principals and principals attending the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) School Leadership Programme at the University of the Free Sate (UFS), realised that many principals are still undermining the legal status and participative decision-making role of principals in their schools, despite the prescripts of the South African School's Act (RSA 1996b). This state of affairs has the potential to disempower the SGBs. It can also lead to the principal taking all decisions on behalf of the SGB, which as such defeats the principle of democracy. Furthermore, this hierarchical power of the principals may lead to a serious power struggle between the SGBs and the principals, ultimately resulting in the learners and community suffering.

Significant research has been conducted on governance in public schools in South Africa since 2000 (Heystek 2004; Heystek 2006; Naidoo 2005; Mncube 2009; Botha 2010; Mokoena 2012:1). However, little research has been done on factors driving and/or inhibiting participative decision making in public schools. This study represents the researcher's attempts to fill this knowledge gap.

Research Question

To ascertain whether or not parent members of SGBs are involved in the decision-making processes at their schools, the following question was posed to the principals: *'To what extent are the parent members of the school governing body (SGB) in your school involved in participative decision making?'*

Aim of the Study

Emanating from the research question, the aim of this study is therefore to establish to what extent the parent members of the SGBs are involved in participative decision making in their schools. To achieve this aim the following objective was pursued:

To identify factors driving and/or inhibiting participative decision making in public schools.

This study therefore focused on identifying factors driving and/or inhibiting participative decision making in public schools. The researcher also makes recommendations on how to address these factors to improve participative decision making in public schools.

The next section deals with the theoretical framework that underpins the study.

Collegial Models as Theoretical Framework

Bush (2007: 394) has presented and classified theories of educational management for more than 20 years. He has categorised the main theories into six major models, inter alia, formal, collegial, political, subjective, ambiguous, and cultural models (Bush 2007: 394). According to Bush (2011: 72), collegial models include all those theories that emphasise that power and decision making should be shared among some or all members/stakeholders of the organisation. Bush (2011: 72) postulates further that the notion of collegiality became enshrined in the folklore of management as the most appropriate way of running schools and colleges in the 1980s and 1990s. Numerous authors support Bush's view by stating that collegial models have become the biggest international trend in education (Wallace 1989: 182; Brundrett 1998: 307; Brown et al. 1999: 320). Furthermore, advocates of the collegial model strongly contend that participative approaches represent the most appropriate means of managing educational institutions (Brown et al. 1999; Thurlow et al. 2003; Hoyle and Wallace 2005). Singh et al. (2007: 549) opine that the collegial models focus on the stakeholder's capacity to play a participatory role in the leadership of the school. They further state that collegial models should be viewed as a process that encourages and accommodates shared decision making. This means that the SGB, as stakeholders of the school, should be involved in making decisions regarding the school.

Bush (2011: 75) proposes that the essence of collegiality is participatory decision making. In this regard, he (2011: 82) attests that collegial models characterise decision making as a participatory process, with all members/stakeholders of the institution (school) having an equal opportunity to influence policy and actions. Bush (2011: 73-76) further points out that collegial models have the following major features:

They are strongly normative in orientation. All theories tend to be normative, but collegial approaches, in particular, reflect the prescriptive view that management ought to be based on agreement. Advocates of these models believe that decision making should be based on democratic principles.

Collegial models are seen as particularly appropriate for organisations, such as schools and colleges, which have significant numbers of professional personnel. The professional personnel (teachers) possess authority arising directly from their knowledge and skills. This implies that they have authority of expertise that contrasts with the positional authority associated with formal models.

Collegial models assume a common set of values held by members/stakeholders of the organisation. These common values guide the managerial activities of the organisation and, in particular, are thought to lead to shared educational objectives.

The size of the decision-making groups is an important element in collegial management. The collegial model deals with the problem of scale by building on the assumption that personnel have formal representation within the various decision-making bodies (committees).

Collegial models assume that decisions are taken by consensus, rather than by division or conflict. Advocates of the collegial models believe that the common values and shared objectives lead to the view that it is both desirable and possible to resolve problems by agreement.

From the discussion above, it is evident that there is a strong connection between the aspirations of SASA, especially with the introduction of SGBs and the greater prominence given to SMTs, which suggest a firm commitment to participative decision making and to collegial models with regard to participatory decision making in schools. The researcher is therefore of the opinion that the collegial model is the most suitable model to underpin this study, with its focus on identifying driving and/or inhibiting factors affecting participative decision making in South African public schools.

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

The qualitative research method was used to elicit the participants' views on the involvement of parent members of the school governing body in participative decision making in their school. This approach enabled the researcher to draw information from the participants' lived experiences about participative decision making in their school. Qualitative researchers are motivated by an in-depth inquiry into studying a phenomenon in its natural setting, to make sense of, as well as to interpret the phenomenon in terms of meanings and understandings constructed by people (Denzin 2005: 3). The researcher requested the participants to write narratives on the question: 'To what extent is the school governing body in your school involved in participative decision making?' The qualitative research method allowed the researcher to elicit the information needed from the narratives of the participants and to analyse it. Using this method enabled the researcher to interpret and understand the complex views of the participants and the subjective meanings they assign to their experiences.

Data Collection

Selection of Participants

The researcher used the convenience sampling method to select participants for this study. The participants are practising principals who are information rich and who are completing their two-year course for the Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE), presented in the Faculty of Education, at the University of the Free State.

These principals were selected to attend this course by the Free State Department of Education (FSDoE) from across the Free State province to improve the quality of education in their respective schools.

Profile of Participants

The principals constituted mostly those from townships and rural areas, who on average have more than five years' experience as principals or more than ten years' experience as teachers or as senior managers. The Advanced Certificate in Education class was approached to participate in the study. The class consisted of fifty practicing school principals, both male and female, in their final year of study, of which twenty-five participated voluntarily in the enquiry.

Ethical Considerations

Informed Consent

In this enquiry, the voluntary participation of the participants was obtained and acknowledged at all times. All the participants were informed regarding the aims of the inquiry, the research methods, the nature of participation, and the possible publication of the results. The participants were also informed of their right not to participate or to withdraw when they felt that their participation would put them at risk (Creswell 2007: 44).

Confidentiality and Anonymity

The principals were requested to write narratives on the extent to which parent members of the school governing bodies were involved in participative decision making in their schools. They were constantly assured of their anonymity and that the information acquired through their narratives would be treated ethically and confidentially (Cohen et al. 2011: 62).

Data Analysis

In analysing the narratives, two coding procedures, namely open coding and axial coding were used (Merriam 2009). After carefully reading the responses of the participants, open coding was used to identify themes and the subthemes. The researcher then categorised the main

themes and sub-themes according to their properties, dimensions and incidents. In applying the axial coding method, the researcher identified relationships or connections between the main themes and the sub-themes to assist in giving meaning to the themes (Nieuwenhuis 2008: 107).

Trustworthiness

The following two strategies were used to strengthen the study:

A peer check was done. An experienced qualitative researcher and the researcher independently read and coded the transcripts and took part in consensus discussions (McMillan and Schumacher 2010: 274).

Member checking was used. If something from the narratives was not understood, the researcher returned to the participants to confirm the meaning of what was asked, to strengthen the study (McMillan and Schumacher 2010: 275).

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The South African School's Act (RSA 1996b) provides for the decentralisation of power at school level through the establishment of SGBs, which wield considerable authority and responsibility with regard to decision making. Botha (2010: 574) adds that, while decentralisation or democratisation in school governance is generally understood to refer to the devolution of decision-making authority from a higher central level to the lower local level, it specifically refers to the shifting of decision-making power from the DoE to the school level. In this regard, Bush (2011: 73) claims that the normative dimension of collegiality is particularly evident in post-apartheid South Africa. He points out that there is a powerful commitment to democratic institutions fuelled by an understandable reaction to the injustices and inequalities of the past. This is particularly evident in the decision to establish governing bodies in all public schools represented by parents, teachers, non-educators and co-opted members, as well as secondary school students on these bodies. He continues to assert that the South African government links school governance to wider democratic objectives in its advice to school governors, by stating that, similar to the country that has a government, the school that one's child and other children in the community attend needs a government to serve the

school and the school community (Bush 2011: 73). To ascertain whether parent members of SGBs are involved in decision-making processes in their schools, the following question was posed to the principals: *'To what extent are the parents, as members of the school governing body (SGB) in your school involved in participative decision making?'* It is important to note that, although the question to the principals is aimed at the parent component of the SGB, reference is made to the SGB as a whole throughout the study.

The principals' narratives revealed that in most of their schools, there was no participative decision making. Among other, they highlighted reasons such as the school governing bodies' lack of knowledge about governance and policy development, financial matters, poor literacy levels, abdication of its power to the principal and the dominance of principals over school governing bodies. These themes are discussed in the paragraphs below.

Theme 1: The school governing body's lack of knowledge about governance and policy development as an inhibiting factor

In response to this theme, most of the principals indicated that the parent members of the SGB lacked knowledge of what constitutes governance. Some of them responded as follows:

Some SGB members have a motive of disciplining the principal and wanted to control. They do not stick to governance and want to do administration which causes friction (Principal Q).

Sometimes the SGBs overstep their territory: for example by trying to execute the functions of school management. (Principal U).

These views are supported by Principals O and C. Principal O contends that *some SGB members, especially the older ones, are under the impression that they should be policing the principal and the educators*, while Principal C remarks that *SGBs have to be trained in their roles and responsibilities because they sometimes overstep the line and want to move on to management issues.*

These statements suggest that the SGB members do not understand their governance role, because this "overstepping" seem to be a common problem in South Africa. This overstepping of boundaries also suggests the inability of the SGB to interpret SASA correctly. Khuzwayo and

Chikoko (2009: 148) confirm this by saying that some principals find it difficult to perform their duties because of what they view as "interference" of SGB chairpersons. Furthermore, Heystek (2006: 475) warns that this lack of knowledge about governance may lead parent members of the SGB to believe that they can control the school.

The South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996 (RSA 1996b), mandates all public schools in South Africa to elect a school governing body as part of the governance structure in schools. According to Section 16 of SASA (RSA 1996), the professional management of the school is the responsibility of the principal, while the governance of the school is the responsibility of the SGB. Karlsson (2002: 330) calls this "a neat separation of governance and management responsibilities to avoid interference into the others area of jurisdiction," which could lead to unnecessary conflict. The move to institute SGBs was motivated by the need to dismantle the previously centralised bureaucratic and authoritarian management of schools and to replace it with a democratic system which conforms to the principles of social justice. However, the election of SGBs in schools since 1997 has created a field of tension between some SGBs and principals, which in turn has disturbed the power relations in many schools.

Xaba (2011: 201) adds to this statement by pointing out that school governance in South Africa is the single most important factor in education that seems to experience apparently insurmountable challenges. He posits that despite SASA existing for more than 18 years and the various attempts aimed at training and capacity building of SGBs, it seems that efforts to have effective school governance fall far short of its intended outcomes. Xaba (2011: 201-202) further argues that the aforementioned can be attributed to irrelevant and inadequate training of SGB members which does not really address the core function of school governance. Mncube (2012: 141), in support of Xaba, says that SGB members are unable to perform their functions effectively, due to the lack of training and induction into the role they have to play. Mncube (2012:142) recommends that SGB members should receive education and training with added impetus that goes far beyond their normal functions. This implies training and education that would enable SGBs to examine their roles and power rela-

tions critically. In relation to the aforementioned, Smit and Oosthuizen (2012: 70) contend that all stakeholders should be trained by inculcating essential knowledge in order to improve school governance.

Other principals emphasised SGB members' lack of knowledge of participative decision making and policy development. Their responses are captured hereunder:

The school governing body is not really involved, because they lack knowledge and experience to make decisions; they only visit the school when meetings are held (Principal O). In addition, Principal Q stated that schools were managed effectively when SGB members were people who could read and write, people who had university degrees and who knew the importance of education.

Principals O and Q's views on this lack of involvement may be ascribed to a lack of knowledge on decision making and policy development on the part of the parent members of the SGB. These views are supported by Principal N who states: *Because I, as principal, have knowledge of the policies and the regulations of the Department of Education, I always give them direction.*

The situation portrayed by the above-mentioned principals is a direct contradiction of the principle of participatory democracy as espoused by SASA (RSA 1996b: section 16(1)). These statements may point to the fact that, because the principal is in the privileged position of often dealing with education policies and regulations, they will take advantage of the SGBs' lack of knowledge of policies and regulations and as such, dominate the decision-making process. Mncube (2009: 99) found that the reason for this lack of participation by parent members of SGBs could be attributed to a lack of confidence of these members. He further states that they also need to have a certain level of competency, literacy and skill to make positive contributions. According to Xaba (2011: 208), the South African School's Act requires highly skilled functionaries (SGBs) with specialised knowledge in areas such as financial accounting, facility maintenance, and policy development and formulation. The aforementioned author's views support the findings of the report of the Ministerial Review Committee (DoE 2004: 91), which reported that 44 per cent of participants felt that the skills and knowledge deficit of SGBs weakened their effective functioning.

The responses of the principals and the literature confirm that some SGBs in some schools lack the knowledge of school governance and policy development. This implies that SGBs in such schools would find it difficult to govern these schools or to develop policies for these schools. This situation is in contradiction with the prescripts of SASA, which states that SGBs are responsible for the governance of the school, which includes policy development, while the principal is responsible for the management of the school, which includes the implementation of the policies. This means a shared responsibility between the stakeholders, including participative decision making. These responses further suggest that SGBs need to be trained in school governance, especially in decision making. The purpose of the introduction of SASA was to address the imbalances of the past, where principals made all the decisions on their own, because they believed that they were more knowledgeable about school matters and education policies. This is in contradiction of section 19(2) of SASA, which requires that the HoD must ensure that principals and other officers of the education department render all necessary assistance to SGBs in the performance of their functions. The responses also suggest that some parent members of the SGBs are not knowledgeable about school governance, policy development and decision making. It becomes clear from these responses that some principals ignore the wealth of knowledge existing among the different stakeholders, and implementing and developing it. In this context, Hargreaves and Fink (2008: 232) propose that principals should move away from hierarchical structures to communities, networks or webs premised on shared collaboration, where their function is to "connect and contribute, rather than to command and control."

In relation to the above, collegial models assume that schools determine policy and make decisions through a process of discussion, leading to consensus where power is shared among some or all members/stakeholders of the school (Bush 2011: 75). The collegial models also characterise decision making as a participatory process with all members/stakeholders of the school having an equal opportunity to influence policy and action. In relation to the aforementioned, Dowling-Hetherington (2013: 220) asserts that a participative collegial approach to decision making is seen as one of the central values underpinning school life. In this instance, collegial models strongly propagate that shared decisions are likely to be better informed and are also much more likely to be implemented effectively in the school (Bush 2011: 72-74). The above-mentioned principles of the collegial models are in line with the principles of inclusivity and decentralisation as espoused by SASA. This, in effect, means that the collegial models promote the principle of cooperative governance in a democratic dispensation.

Theme 2: The school governing body's lack of financial knowledge as an inhibiting factor

Financial management, as a core function of the governing bodies, is another area where the SGBs lack knowledge and skills, as reflected by the narrations of the following responses:

The school governing body lacks knowledge and skills in finances (Principal X).

The school governing body does not understand how school finances should be used (Principal G).

The above-mentioned principals point out that some SGBs lack financial knowledge and skills, despite having been given full responsibility by legislation to manage the finances of the school.

The devolution of decision making to schools requires SGBs to execute several responsibilities, which include, among others, school-based budgeting. In this regard, Principal B said in no uncertain terms that:

Our SGB cannot do budgeting.

This statement clearly suggests that SGB members do not have the knowledge and skills to engage effectively with financial matters.

Fundraising is another area of weakness among parent members of the SGB. In this context, Principal O wrote that*:*

When it comes to their real duty, that of raising funds for the school, they (SGB) can only make suggestions, but expects the educators to do the work. They can't do it themselves. SGBs need thorough and proper training.

The above implies that SGB members should have financial knowledge and skills to run the finances of the school effectively and efficiently. The literature corroborates the views of these principals. Section 20 of SASA (RSA 1996b: s.20) gives the SGBs full responsibility for managing the finances of the school. Furthermore, the Min-

isterial Review Committee (DoE 2004: 104) reported that financial management is ranked as the most important function of the SGBs and should occupy most of their time. Van Wyk (2004: 49) adds that school financial management involves the management of funds, both from the parents and the state, which requires that the SGBs should possess financial management skills. According to Xaba (2011: 208), SASA requires highly skilled functionaries (SGBs), with specialised knowledge in areas such as financial accounting. Mestry (2006: 28) points out that, although SASA (RSA 1996b) provides guidelines for SGBs and principals regarding their roles and responsibilities in managing the school's finances, SGBs and principals still struggle to manage their schools' finances, because they either have too little knowledge of SASA, or interpret the Act incorrectly. He also states that SGBs and principals are just not able to work out practical solutions to their financial problems, because of their lack of financial knowledge, skills and expertise. In support of Mestry, Van Wyk (2004: 49) contends that SGBs are not trained in managing school finances and therefore, they do not know what is expected of them. They only sign cheques and do not work according to a budget (Van Wyk 2004: 53).

The statements of the principals and the extracts from the literature suggest that the lack of financial knowledge and skills of the SGBs may result in their not establishing a finance committee or developing a financial policy for the school as suggested by SASA. SASA (1996(b): section 30(1)) makes provision for SGBs to establish committees and that such committees may be chaired by a parent member. The finance committee, as a sub-committee of the SGB, has as its main function, the managing and reporting of the school's finances to the SGB.

In this regard, collegial models suggest that SGBs have formal representation on decision-making bodies, such as finance committees (Bush 2011: 74-75). This formal type of representation on smaller committees presents SGB members with the opportunity to actively participate in the decision-making process and to contribute to the advancement of the school.

Theme 3: The school governing body's poor literacy levels as an inhibiting factor

The literacy levels of SGBs, as an inhibiting factor for poor participation in decision making, was also highlighted by the participants. Partic-

ipants L, U and X made it very clear that participative decision making cannot take place where parent members of the SGBs are illiterate. This is illustrated by the following responses:

Most members of the school governing body are not literate and have a problem in interpreting the constitution and policies (Principal L).

Most of the members of the SGB are not literate and have a problem in interpreting the constitution and policies (Principal U).

Most parents are illiterate. They do not work and are always or more often out of town to look for work (Principal X).

The above-mentioned principals suggest that participative decision making can only take place if parent members of the SGBs are literate. In relation to this statement, Mncube et al. (2011: 225) contend that the level of education of parent members of the SGB is one of several factors that hamper their effective participation. This includes, inter alia, taking part in decision making. According to Mncube (2009: 95), parental participation depends entirely on their educational level, which plays a major role in their contributions; otherwise, they are passive listeners. Tsotetsi et al. (2008: 387), in support of Mncube, attest that the ability of the governing bodies to govern schools depends on their literacy levels, skills, knowledge and experience of governance. The views of the aforementioned authors are further corroborated by the literature, in that parent governors, because most of them are illiterate, cannot interpret legislation and policies and may even make their own interpretations of the constitution and school policies (DoE 2004: 91; Heystek 2006: 280; Xaba 2011: 206). Findings from research done by Xaba (2011: 206) revealed that SGB members rely on the inputs of educators in the drawing up and implementation of policies. In this regard, the SGB acted as a "rubber stamp" (Xaba 2011: 206). This inability of the SGBs to understand and interpret SASA and other school-related acts and policies, places the SGBs in a poor position to govern schools. This creates a situation where they rely on the principal for interpreting all documents. When this type of a situation occurs in a school, it becomes inevitable for the principal to take all decisions on their behalf, where after they merely become "rubber stamps" (Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004: 423). This is confirmed by the responses of principals P and G who contend that:

They always accept what I say. They do not question (Principal P).

As principal, I still teach and guide them (Principal G).

These statements by the principals are a clear indication that decisions are made on their behalf, because they (the SGB members) accept what they are told and never ask questions. Furthermore, these statements also suggest that the principals are aware of the poor literacy levels and knowledge of the SGB members regarding the acts and policies; therefore, the principals always guide and give them direction.

SASA does not prescribe any academic qualifications for parents to serve on SGBs. Parents serve on an SGB by virtue of their having children at the school or are co-opted to serve on the SGB because they possess certain skills which are required for the effective functioning of the school (Joubert and Bray 2007: 32). Mncube (2009: 225) is of the opinion that you can still have parents on the SGB who are illiterate, but it should be the responsibility of the principal to empower them. Mokeona (2011: 125) points out that principals need to speak in simpler language so that everyone can understand. In this context Naicker and Mestry (2013: 12) denote that principals need to learn that they can share decision making with other stakeholders (SGBs), because a principal alone cannot be held accountable for the leadership and management of a school. Mncube (in Botha 2010: 575) adds that decision making and the encouragement of participation between stakeholders leads to more effective schools and consequently, to their democratisation.

Bush (2011: 75) sheds light on the aforementioned by asserting that the essence of collegiality is participation in decision making. He states that through shared decision making, power is shared with all stakeholders represented on the SGBs, irrespective of the member's literacy levels. Furthermore, collegiality is acclaimed as a way for stakeholders to benefit from the support, insight and expertise of their colleagues (Brown et al. 1999: 320). This implies that shared decision making may empower parent members on SGBs with certain skills and knowledge, while at the same time, educators can learn from the experiences of parents.

Theme 4: Abdication of the school governing body's power to the principal as an inhibiting factor

Khuzwayo and Chikoko's (2009: 161) findings revealed that SGB chairpersons are largely dependent on the principal for guidance on school governance and policy matters. Three of the participants attributed the abdication of power to the SGBs' reliance on the principals, even on matters that involve them directly. This is illustrated by the narrations of the following participants:

The school governing body relies mostly on what is said by the principal (Principal L).

They look up to the principal and school management team for leadership, even in matters that involved them directly (Principal P).

They rely on the principal and the school management team to lead the activities, they just follow suit (Principal M).

These statements seem to suggest that some SGBs are not yet ready to govern, because they rely on the principal to give them guidance, even on matters that involve them directly. This implies that some SGBs are not taking decisions in the best interests of the learners; instead, they simply agree with everything the principal says and carry out his orders. This type of relationship leads to a situation where the principal claims all the decision-making power, despite the significant amount of decision-making power devolved to the SGB. The aforementioned is confirmed by Naicker and Mestry (2013: 6) who state that power and decision making remains the domain of the principal and SMT in schools with a rigid hierarchical structure. In relation to the findings of the previous authors, Somech (2010: 174) opines that the increasing emergence of participation in decision making in schools reflects the widely shared belief that the flatter management and decentralised authority structure carry the potential for promoting school effectiveness. Somech (2010: 175) holds the notion that flatter management structures carry the potential for achieving outcomes unattainable under schools with a traditional top-down bureaucratic structure.

Three other participants stated in their narratives that:

The previous school governing body left 95 percent of the decisions in the school management team's hands (Principal B).

They just carry out orders (Principal G).

These responses suggest that SGBs have given all their responsibilities over to the principal. In this context, it implies that in schools where SGBs are not involved in the decision making of the school, they became subordinate to the prin-

cipals, because they have ceded power to them. This type of situation inevitably and subsequently makes some SGBs subservient to their principals, to the extent that they become mere observers, instead of participants in decision making as required and prescribed by SASA. The statements further suggest that some SGBs lack knowledge and skills to perform the roles and functions assigned to them by SASA. This may imply that the HoD fails to provide continuous training to SGBs to promote the effective performance of their functions, as prescribed by section 19 (1b) of SASA (RSA 1996b). This state of affairs further implies that the HoD does not ensure that the principal and other officers of the DoE render assistance to the SGBs in the performance of their functions (SASA 1996b: section 19 (2)). These findings corroborate the literature.

Van Wyk (2004: 51) posits that SGBs lack confidence, because they do not understand their duties and responsibilities. Mncube (2009: 99) supports this view and points out that some SGB members lack confidence, which may be attributed to a perception by SGB parent members that principals and their SMTs are more educated and knowledgeable about educational aspects. In this case they may be led to believe that they should leave all the decisions in the hands of the principal and the SMT and simply carry out orders. To this end, and in relation to the above, Mabasa and Themane (2002: 112) confirm that SGBs are not trained before they start their work as governors; as a result they refer most governance functions to the principals and merely act as "rubber stamps" to decisions taken on their behalf, without their full understanding and involvement. In this regard, Heystek (2006: 475) argues that numerous public schools in South Africa, especially the former disadvantaged schools, are still too traditional in their way of thinking and too bureaucratic as far as participative decision making is concerned (most of the above quoted principals are from township schools). This notion is corroborated in earlier research done by Heystek and Paquette (1999: 191) who assert that neither parents, nor educators has had much experience of participative decision making in the past, since principals were considered to be the only people with knowledge on school matters. This situation is confirmed by recent research done by Mncube et al. (2011: 226). According to these authors, SGBs function very effectively in former Model C

schools (these schools are mainly situated in the white communities), where decision making was devolved to the governing structures before 1994. This, in turn, led to the effective functioning of these schools. However, the opposite happened at ordinary public schools, situated mainly in the townships and rural areas. Their findings revealed that the performance of SGBs had not improved in the ordinary public schools since 1998, but rather exacerbated the situation in the latter schools, with many SGBs having had their powers usurped by the principals.

Advocates of the collegial models believe that participative approaches represent the most appropriate means of managing educational institutions (Brown et al. 1999; Thurlow et al. 2003; Hoyle and Wallace 2005). According to Bush (2011: 82) collegial models characterise decision making as a participatory process with all members/stakeholders of the institution (school) having an equal opportunity to influence policy and action. Bush (2011:75), furthermore, strongly postulates that the essence of collegiality is participatory decision making and not the function of one single individual. This implies that principals should refrain from regarding members of the SGB, especially the parent members, as incompetent or unknowledgeable when it comes to decision making. Instead, they should be doing what SASA (RSA 1996b section 19(2)) requires them to do, namely to assist the SGBs to perform their functions. Mokoena (2011: 121) adds that principals are now, more than previously, required to lead the whole school community, while facilitating participation and collaboration among stakeholders in decision making, planning and budgeting, among others.

Another factor mentioned by the participants in their narratives is the dominance of principals over school governing bodies.

Theme 5: Dominance of principals over school governing bodies as an inhibiting factor

Principals are often accused of dominating discussions. Some of the participants mentioned in their narrations that principals dominate SGBs, especially in township schools. One of the participants wrote:

In township schools principals still dominate discussions (Principal K).

According to Karlsson (2002: 332) this dominance is exercised to such an extent that the

SGBs succumb to it and become reluctant to voice their ideas and opinions. The following excerpts from the participants' narratives illustrate this opinion.

They are very reluctant to voice their ideas (Principal L).

They should be fully involved in all school activities and receive information from the school management team and the principal. When you involve SGB members in decision-making, they feel part of the school and this motivates them to take part in all activities (Principal A).

The above statements align with the literature that suggests that principals have been accused of, and found to dominate decision making in SGBs (Heystek 2006: 480; Karlsson 2002: 332). Karlsson (2002: 332) confirms that in almost every SGB she studied, principals played a dominant role in meetings and decision making. She attributes this dominant attitude of the principals to their position of power in the school; their level of education in contrast to the other members; having first access to information from education authorities; and the fact that they execute the decisions taken by the SGBs. Botha (2010: 582-583) also states that principals play a dominant role in meetings and in decision making in most SGBs. He points out that decisions in most cases are taken by the principal and his/her senior management team (SMT) instead of the SGB. Naicker and Mestry (2013: 7) suggest that a transition to a democratic leadership style has not transpired in such schools as is required by SASA. These authors further state that South African school leaders (Principals) should embrace the views of SGB members in the context of post-modernism, and move away from a reliance on hierarchical structures, which are insignificant in a fluid organisation. This implies that a more inclusive and participative approach is appropriate in a new democracy such as South Africa. In the same vein, Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis (2013: 170) postulate that the participatory leadership movement has gained much popularity over the last three decades. In this context, Spillane (cited in Sarafidou and Chatziioannidis 2013: 170) denotes that participatory leadership engages all members of an organisation in jointly identifying its vision, goals, and strategies, and involves them in decision making. This is the type of leadership envisaged by SASA. SASA was instituted to, inter alia redress past exclusions and to foster representation and participation in decision making.

The above statements clearly suggest that, in some schools, the principals dominate the discussions and the decisions, because they are privileged to have first-hand information. Xaba (2011: 209) remarks that the dual role principals play might also allow principals to position themselves above all the other members of the SGB, thus creating conditions for their dominance over the other members. According to Xaba, this contradicts the notion that once in the SGB, all members assume equal status as governors. Xaba (2011: 209) further stresses the point that because the principal is a permanent member of the school governing body who has acquired better insight and knowledge of governance issues over time, will consider him or herself as a mentor to the other members.

In relation to the above, collegial models assume that common values and shared objectives lead to the belief that it is both desirable and possible to resolve problems through agreement. The decision-making process may be a protracted exercise, exacerbated by the search for compromise, but the collegial models regard this as an acceptable price to pay to maintain the aura of shared values and beliefs (Bush 2011: 75). Collegial models also consider it as very appropriate to involve people in the decisions that affect their professional lives and those of their children. Therefore, imposing decisions on SGBs is considered morally repugnant, and inconsistent with the notion of consent and democracy (Bush 2011: 75).

Principals should remember that SGB parent members bring a wealth of knowledge from their own experiences to the school, which they could use to the advantage and advancement of the school.

CONCLUSION

SASA, as a democratic reform policy framework, advocates participative decision making between the different stakeholders in the school. This is also the notion of the collegial models, which assume that decisions should be based on democratic principles and that the essence of collegiality is participation in decision making. However, despite the prescripts of SASA, the participants in this study pointed out that participative decision making is not practiced in most

of their schools. This implies that not all the principals who participated in this study embrace the principles of democracy espoused by SASA, and are therefore not carrying them out consistently. Therefore, principals in schools should not preach the principles of democracy, while failing to adhere to others, such as the principle of participative decision making. In relation to participative decision making, participation by all stakeholders is essential if schools are to be managed harmoniously and effectively.

With regard to the research question: *"To what extent are the parent members of the school governing body (SGB) in your school involved in participative decision making?",* the principals identified certain inhibiting factors of participative decision making. These factors include, inter alia, the school governing body's lack of knowledge about governance and policy development, financial knowledge, poor literacy levels, the abdication of the school governing body's power to the principal, and the dominance of principals over school governing bodies. This study has shown that there is sufficient evidence in the literature to support the participants' responses with regard to the identified inhibiting factors for participative decision making. These inhibiting factors pose the threat that poor working relations may develop between the stakeholders, resulting in a failure to work together in the best interests of the learners. Consequently, the SGB, and ultimately the school, may become dysfunctional. To this end and in relation to the threat posed by the inhibiting factors, the collegial model assumes that its members hold a set of commonly shared values, which in turn leads to a shared vision among stakeholders. This shared vision then forms the basis for shared goals, which are essential for a school to be effective. Therefore, agreement on the shared goals by all stakeholders is a sound starting point for developing structures and processes required to enhance learning, which is the primary reason why learners are at school. Shared goals are also a means of measuring success, which means that a school is effective only if it has achieved its goals and objectives. Furthermore, a culture characterised by collaboration is what is needed in schools today. Various authors have indicated that, in a post-modern South Africa, principals should embrace all stakeholders in a flatter structure rather than holding on to a hierarchical form of structure. This in effect implies collaboration with all stakeholders, especially in decision making between stakeholders.

SASA advocates the decentralisation of more decision-making power to the SGB at school level. Knowledge of governance and management, as well as participative decision making is a prerequisite for decentralisation and democratisation to be successful. Numerous calls have been made by the academe for capacity building that will improve the knowledge of stakeholders, with regard to their specific roles and functions, together with capacity building in participative decision making. It was, however, pointed out in the literature that the current mode of capacity building of SGBs by the DoE is irrelevant and inadequate and does not really address the core function of school governance, and in particular, the aspect of participative decision making. It is regrettable to report that the principals themselves, who are supposed to understand and know the provisions of SASA and who are instructed to assist in capacitating SGBs, identify the inhibiting factors. In this regard, the DoE has also consistently failed to address the ignorance and/or failure of some principals and SGBs to implement the provisions of SASA. By exposing the failure of participative decision making in some schools, the opportunity is presented to the DoE to act decisively in remedying this undemocratic practice by some principals and SGBs. Therefore, unless the DoE devises and implements effective capacity building programmes to improve the knowledge base of governing body members, including the principal, with regard to participative decision making in particular, some principals will maintain their position as prior to 1994, where the formal position of the principal was to take decisions unilaterally. The challenge and duty to prepare SGBs and principals adequately for their difficult task, falls squarely on the shoulders of the DoE as the custodian of education in a democratic South Africa.

RECOMMENDATIONS

To address the improvement of participative decision making in schools, it is recommended that these inhibiting factors should be highlighted during capacity-building workshops presented by the DoE. The negative impact of these inhibiting factors should be emphasised during capacity-building workshops and linked to sec-

tions 19(2) of SASA, which stipulates that the HoD must ensure that principals and other officers of the education department must render all necessary assistance to governing bodies in the performance of their functions. These workshops should also aim to build a working relationship that ultimately develops into a partnership between the two stakeholders, to better understand their main function, which is to promote the best interests of learners and the school at all times. Principals should also acquire the skill to relinquish traditional authoritative roles and allow SGBs not only to have a greater voice, but to also help prepare them, by providing support, as well as establishing an environment of trust.

It is further recommended that SASA should be translated into all eleven languages to make its contents more understandable for all stakeholders. SGB members find it difficult to comprehend and interpret the prescripts of SASA. Therefore, in relation to the previous recommendation, it is further urged that SASA should be amended to include, specifically, the number of capacity-building workshops per annum.

Furthermore, the provincial departments of education should forge partnerships with tertiary institutions in their respective provinces to develop all stakeholders in terms of governance and management issues in preparing them for their tasks. Short course capacity-building programmes of about one year should also be introduced for SGBs, in terms of governance and particularly participative decision making. These courses could be presented to clusters of SGBs in the dominant language of the particular community. In this regard, principals should play a major role to empower their communities. The empowering of the SGBs through relevant education and training is therefore very important to boost the confidence and knowledge of especially the parent members of the SGBs, so that they can view themselves as equal partners in decision making. It should be noted that not all SGB members are replaced after three years. Furthermore, parent members who have undergone training can also assist and advise other parent members even when they are not serving as SGB members anymore. In this way, parents will be empowered and not be regarded as illiterate.

Finally, the provincial department of education should establish a structure which will ensure that participative decision making is practised in every public school, where no one stakeholder dominates the other. This arrangement will ensure that stakeholders will respect and accept one another as equal partners in the education of the learners in their respective schools. It is only when a culture of respect and acceptance of one another exists among stakeholders, that participative decision making will come into its full right in schools. A more extensive study on the factors inhibiting participative decision making, which would include principals and chairpersons of governing bodies throughout South Africa, may add more insight into this phenomenon.

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