

## The Principals' Views on Parent Participation in Governance of Rural Schools

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**ABSTRACT** The aim of this article is to explore the views of principals on parent participation in governance of rural schools. Apart from a literature review on parent participation in school governance, the article reports on a study in which empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from rural school principals. The literature findings revealed that parent participation in school governance is a critical component of education in South Africa. The study further revealed that empirical findings elicited that rural school principals would like parents to have a significant role to play in school governance. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for parents participating in the school governance of rural schools to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance activities.

### INTRODUCTION

Education worldwide is becoming increasingly accountable to the public and therefore it can be argued that parents should play a role in policy making and execution, as they institute a major stakeholder group. Mechanisms to involve parents in the governance of schools are employed globally as a form of democratising education (Mncube 2009). It becomes difficult to dispute the benefits that parent participation can have for children's school experiences, yet parents participating in school governance and school principals often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play. Decker et al. (1994) in Duma (2009) observed that that school principals and parents in school participating governance often have uncertainties about the roles that the each should play in the governance of schools. Some principals love to have parents intricately involved in the governance of their schools, while others feel that too much parent participation in the governance of schools violates their sense of professionalism. Van Schalkwyk (1998) in Duma (2009) warns that some principals have a negative attitude towards parents. Principals with such an attitude, tend to blame parents for prying in the school governance processes.

Mncube (2009) strengthens this notion by submitting that some school principals regard themselves as superior to parents. They are reluctant to work with parents participating in

school governance and are negative towards them as they regard them as irksome and troublesome. Badenhorst (1992) in Mkentane (2003) argues that if school principals ignore the strengths that the father and mother figures can bring to schools, valuable resources that could have a positive impact on the school governance activities are neglected.

In South Africa, until 1994, the Apartheid state excluded the majority of citizens from genuine and equal participation in schools. In 1996, the South African democratic state promulgated the National Education Policy Act (Act No. 27 of 1996) which outlined the organisation, management, and governance of schools. It stipulated that education policies have to ensure broad public participation in the development of the education system and the representation of stakeholders in the governance of all aspects of the education system (Oosthuizen 2004). This Act, for the first time, provided for the need of parent participation in school governance matters.

In the same year, the state published an Education White Paper 2 (General Notice 130 of 1996) on Organisation and Funding of Schools (Republic of South Africa 1996) and by this it aimed to foment democratic institutional management, thereby introducing a school governance structure that involves all the stakeholder groups in active and responsible roles in order to encourage tolerance, rational discussion, and collective decision making. The Education

White Paper 2 aimed at transforming South Africa's pattern of school governance, since that was burdened with the legacy of the apartheid system. It aimed at doing so in accordance with standard democratic values and practices, and in line with the requirements of the Constitution (RSA 1996). The document had limited but very significant objectives. It outlined the policy of the government on the governance of schools, and the development of capacity for school leadership throughout the country. Furthermore, it aimed at providing an acceptable agenda for the achievement of a truly democratic school governance system in a varied society. The White Paper incorporated a major role for parents in school governance, to be exercised in the essence of a partnership between the state and the community.

From this White Paper originated the South African Schools Act 1996, which became effective from the beginning of 1997 and mandated that all public state schools in South Africa must have democratically elected school governing bodies composed of teachers, non-teaching staff, parents, and learners. The core of the South African Schools Act was to transform education away from the iniquitous policies of the past. Its main thrust was the normalisation 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, school principals and parents and most significantly, the participation of parents in school governance (RSA 1996). This Act furthermore vested the governance of every public school in the hands of parents through the establishment of school governing bodies for all public schools. The functions of the school governing bodies are clearly stated in the South African Schools Act. These functions include, among others, recommending the appointment of principals, teachers and non-teaching staff, deciding on the language policy of the school, control and maintenance of the school property, and determining school fees. As members of the school governing bodies, parent representatives are required to take part actively in the execution of these functions (RSA 1996).

Various studies have been carried out on the functioning of school governing bodies in South Africa (Heystek 2004). However, little research

has been conducted on views of rural school principals on parent participation in school governance.

Consequently, the aim of the article is to probe the views held by rural school principals on parent participation in school governance, problems encountered by rural school principals when attempting to involve parents in school governance and the suggestions the rural school principals have on encouraging the effective parent participation in school governance.

### **Discussion of Democratic Principles and Practices**

The philosophy underpinning this paper is a democratic theory of education. Davies (2002) in Mncube (2008) contends that a democratic theory of education was concerned with the process of "double democratisation", the synchronized democratisation of both education and society. On the contrary, without a more democratic system of education, the development of a democratic society was unlikely to take place. Mncube (2009) further on declares that there is now a significant amount of international and comparative literature on democratic education, which includes the many arguments supporting it, alluding to (Murphy 2006; Davies et al. 2002; Harber 2004) as examples.

Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools, Carter et al. (2003) in Mncube (2008) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only as one experience them. Mncube (2008) asserts that democratic schools and democracy itself do not grow by chance, but they result from explicit attempts by educators, and thus schools, to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. Therefore, a democratic school is one that allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberations dealing with the school governance, where they are prepared to live in democracy through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. In terms of this article, these skills, values, and behaviours are obtained through active democratic involvement of parents in school governance.

Terchek and Conte (2001) submit that there is no single theory of democracy; only theories. Yet however different many of them are from one another, these theories belong to a family,

and they share some family resemblances. Most obviously, they reject the idea that one person or a few have any warrant to rule the rest. The reason this is so for most democrats is that they hold that persons are equal in some important ways and all deserve a voice in their governance. This implies that in school governing bodies, parents like other role players have a vital role to play in school governance.

Democratic theories also share the view that each participant carries elementary rational capacities that are sufficient to judge the conduct of the organisation. For such judgments to have a meaning, participants are expected to be free in several important respects; they must be free regarding such matters as speech, making opinions and taking decisions. Duma et al. (2011) posit that democratic norms mandate inclusion as a criterion of political legitimacy. And democracy implies that all members of the organisation are included equally in the decision-making process and, as such, these decisions would be considered by all as legitimate.

In this paper democratic theory of education premises democratic school governance in which parent participation in school governance operations is indispensable. The establishment of the school governing bodies in South Africa increased the parent participation in school governance by establishing roles and developing trust relationships with new partners, namely the school and the family. Governing bodies are built up of stakeholders. They bring together parents, school staff, local authority and sometimes church representatives, as well as representatives from business and the wider community. School governing bodies give parents input at the school management level and create a greater sense of participation in school governance matters (Duma et al. 2011).

The paper addresses the question of how rural school principals view increased parent participation in school governance and what support they require for this change. Through data collection, in the form of questionnaires views of rural school principals regarding parent participation were uncovered.

### **Motivation of the Study**

A cross-section of the field of education management reveals that very little research has been conducted on the views of rural school principals on parent participation in school gover-

nance. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches on this issue.

The process of parent participation in school governance in rural schools is difficult to manage because of the high rate of illiteracy among them (Mashile 2000). Despite the opportunities brought by the new legislations and the need for improvement in school governance, the parent participation in the governance of rural schools today, still need serious improvement.

The researcher, having worked in the rural schools as a teacher and a principal and currently, as a lecturer visiting rural schools to lend support to the university student-teachers, perceives that parents participating in school governance have difficult experiences in the governance of schools and the support from school principals is not evident. One of the major tasks of the parents participating in school governance is to bring about and develop partnership between schools and parents based on trust and respect among all the stakeholders in the governance of schools. School principals, however, express dissatisfaction with the role of parents in the school governance. They cite the high rate of illiteracy among them; hence they have a difficult path to tread in terms of dealing with matters of school governance.

### **Research Problem**

Decentralised governance within the school system requires that the parents play a vital role in school governance matters. However, Macbeth (1989) in Duma (2010) 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 are views of rural school principals on parent participation in school governance in South Africa?

### **METHODOLOGY**

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

## Literature Review

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

## Quantitative Research Paradigm

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study. The research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents (size of the sample and sampling procedures), the research instruments, namely the questionnaires, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

## Population and Sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select twenty five rural school principals in each circuit of Sisonke and UMgungundlovu Districts as respondents. Since these two districts have eight circuits, two hundred rural school principals 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 (McMillan and Schumacher 2006; Kumar 2010). For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant district offices.

## Instrumentation

The questionnaire was used as research instrument. As Kumar (2010) maintains that questionnaires permit anonymity, preclude possible interviewer biases and permit a respondent sufficient time to consider answers before actually answering. Data provided by questionnaires can be more easily analysed and interpreted than the data obtained from verbal responses and lastly, questionnaires can elicit information that cannot be obtained in other methods.

## Format of the Questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 dealt with the biographic

and general information. This section provided the researcher with an understanding and knowledge of the respondents. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the rural school principals' views on parent participation in school governance. The respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*. Section 3 also had closed questions, focusing on the rural school principals' analysis of the role of parents in the governance of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes*, *Unsure*, *No*. Section 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein rural school principals had to mention problems they encounter when attempting to engage parents in school governance and had to suggest what could be done to improve effective parent participation in school governance.

## Administration of the Questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in five rural schools. These schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability, consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires. In the main study, 200 rural school principals were randomly selected and were requested to complete their questionnaires.

The first sample population responses were 152 (76%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 22 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total responses of 174 (87 %) 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 AND DISCUSSION

### General and Biographical Profile of the Respondents

When the item of rural school principals' qualification was analysed, it was realised that

all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

In Table 1, a total population of 174 (n=174) responded. Table 1 revealed that a high proportion of rural school principals (65%) had good academic qualifications. This shows that the education level of the principal population in rural schools is improving. This high qualification rate can help rural school principals to empower parents participating in school governance with capacity building skills to render effective school governance activities

**Table 1: Educational background of principals**

<i>Education qualification</i>	<i>N</i>	<i>%</i>
Below Matric ( Grade 12)	0	0
Matric ( Grade 12)	0	0
Matric + 1 ( M+1)	22	13
Matric + 2 ( M+2)	38	22
Matric +3 and above	114	65
Total	174	100

**Rural School Principals 'Views on Parent Participation in School Governance**

In this section, the school principals were required to indicate their views on parent participation in school governance.

Table 2 focused on rural school principals' views on parent participation in school governance. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree, Agree, Disagree, and Strongly Disagree.*

- Parents have a significant role to play in school governance.

In Table 2, there was congruence among the respondents that parents have a significant role

to play in school governance. Monadjem (2003) notes that many governments and districts have recognised the need for legislations to ensure that parents are intensively involved in school governance. 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.

This positive support for parent participation in school governance indicates that the respondents understand the fact that parents are integral to schooling. As Macbeth (1989) in Duma (2010) observed that parents are first-line clients of the school. The respondents, furthermore, appreciated the fact that the demand for democracy and participation in the South African education system has a long history, stretching from colonial times in the 17<sup>th</sup> century to the intense and bitter student protests in the eighties (Nongqauza 2004). The involvement of parents in school governance is essential in running a successful school as they are empowered to participate in decision-making processes.

- Parents to participate in the employment of school principals.

Table 2 also revealed that all respondents (100%) indicated that parents should select and employ school principals. This unanimous agreement of the respondents to this item might be caused by the fact that the selection of human resources before 1994 had been the exclusive right of the school inspectors, however the new dispensation brought about the decentralization and devolution of authority to parents.

According to the South African Schools Act, parents in school governing bodies must recommend to the Head of the Department of Education the appointment of school principals,

**Table 2: Rural school principals' views1 on parent participation in school governance**

<i>Items</i>		<i>Strongly agree</i>	<i>Agree</i>	<i>Dis-agree</i>	<i>Strongly disagree</i>	<i>Total</i>
Parents have a significant role to play in school governance	N%	7040	8650	1810	00	174100
Parents to participate in the employment of school principals	N%	174100	00	00	00	174100
Parents participating in school governance have a responsibility to support the school managementstructures	N%	14885	85	1815	00	174100
Schools fare better when they drawon parents in school governing bodies' expertise and assistance	N%	12270	3420	1810	00	174100
Parents participating in schoolgovernance ensure that students attend school	N%	13075	2615	1810	00	174100
Parent participation in schoolgovernance can be effective in instilling discipline among students	N%	17442	6638	2615	85	174100
Parents participating in schoolgovernance to maintain the school facilities	N%	14080	3420	00	00	174100

subject to the Employment of School Educators Act of 1998, Public Service Act of 1994 and the Labour Relations Act of 1995 (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005).

- Parents participating in school governance have a responsibility to support the school management structures

Again, Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that they agreed that parents participating in school governance have a responsibility to support the school management structures. Section 20 (1) of the South African Schools Act clearly states that it is the duty of the parents participating in school governance to support the principal, teachers and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions (RSA 1996). Nongqauza (2004) confirms that parents should be drawn into school activities not only in terms of auxiliary tasks, but also in the school management functions of planning, financing, administration and control of the school's property.

- Schools fare better when they draw on the parents' expertise and assistance in school governance

The majority of the respondents (90%), as indicated in Table 2, agreed that schools fare better when they draw on the parents' expertise and assistance in school governance. This impressive support for this item indicates that rural school principals value the involvement of parents in the governance of their schools. Hill and Taylor (2013) also confirm this, when they asseverate that parent participation increases student achievement. She further on insists that research indicates that programmes designed with strong parent participation produce students who perform better than otherwise identical programmes that do not involve them at all.

- Parents participating in school governance ensure that students attend school

As seen from Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that parents participating in schools governance ensure that students attend school. The support that respondents attach to this item indicates that parents in school governance need to urge students to attend school. The South African Schools Act stipulates that every parent must ensure that every student for whom he or she is responsible for attends a school from the first school day of the year in which such student reaches the age

of seven years until the last school day of the year in which such student reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade, whichever occurs first (RSA 1996). In this instance, the parent is legally bound to enforce student attendance in school.

- Parent participation in school governance can be effective in instilling discipline among students

Again, Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that parent participation in school governance could be effective in instilling discipline among students. This response indicates that rural school principals believe that parents, as primary teachers, have a responsibility to mould their children to perfection, on the other hand, the response may imply that since the banning of corporal punishment in schools, the schools find themselves powerless to instil discipline, as Section 10 of the South African Schools Act stipulates that no person may administer corporal punishment at a school to a student and any person who contravenes this section is guilty of an offence and liable for conviction which could be imposed for assault (RSA 1996c). Potgieter et al. (1997) advance that good school discipline is an important feature of effective schools. To achieve good discipline, every school must have a code of conduct, which must be adopted by the school governing body. According to Potgieter et al. (1997), the adopted code of conduct must consist of the school rules that are necessary to make the school environment orderly and safe. It is within this context that rural school principals consider school discipline problems as the responsibility of parents participating in school governance.

- Parents participating in school governance to maintain the school facilities.

In conclusion, Table 2 revealed that all the respondents agreed that parents participating in school governance should maintain the school facilities. This unanimous agreement of rural school principals is in line with the stipulations of the South African Schools Act which demand the school governing body to administer and control the school's property, buildings, and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels (Rossouw and Oosthuizen 2005).

However, Ainley (1995) in Duma (2010) accentuates that parent participation in decision making processes does not necessarily mean that they are actually making decisions, as their in-

involvement has little impact, for instance, on the curriculum, and may be only tokenism.

**Rural School Principals’ Analysis of the Role of Parents in the Governance of Their Schools**

In this section, the school principals were required to analyse the role of parents in the governance of their schools.

Table 3 focused on rural school principals ‘analysis of the role of parents in the governance of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes, Unsure and No*.

- Parents participating in school governance interact with principals regularly in school governance matters.

Table 3 revealed that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that parents participating in school governance do not regularly interact with principals in school governance matters. This implies that most schools do not really use parent governors to promote democratic participation. The majority of schools are still authoritarian and reinforce passive subordination amongst school governing bodies. The policy maintains that parent stakeholders are important instruments for school governance.

- Parents participating in school governance interfere in curriculum issues that they do not have any knowledge on.

Table 3 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (87%) indicated that parents participating in school governance interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on, such as curriculum matters. Parent stakeholders play a pivotal role in democratising the education landscape as they are the structures that represent the voice of the parents. They provide space for parents to articulate their needs, concerns, aspirations as well as present their wishes to the schools. They provide par-

ents with an opportunity to participate in school governance and to participate in appropriate decision making. However, the respondents feel that parents have no informed knowledge about curriculum matters.

- Parents participating in school governance cause some principals to feel that they lose control over their work

It seems that school principals in this survey were concerned that parents participating in school governance cause them to feel that they lose control over their work. As it can be seen from Table 3, a majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that these parents cause some of them to feel that they lose control over their work. This is not surprising because under the Apartheid Education Departments, the idea of parent participation in the governance of rural schools especially in the farm schools was considered as an absurdity of the first order. Decisions about education lay squarely in the domain of principals, farm owners and school inspectors (Duma 2010). So, involving parents in school governance would tantamount to above mentioned stakeholders losing their status and influence in schools.

- The absence of capacity building programmes minimizes parent participation in school governance.

In conclusion, Table 3 revealed that all respondents fully agreed that the absence of capacity building programmes minimizes parent participation in school governance. This implies that school principals generally realize the important role that parents have to play in school governance, but ironically parents participating in school governance receive minimal or no training in this area. There is no adequate provision for capacity building programmes for these parents, despite the fact that it is mandatory for the provincial Head of Education Department to set up training programmes for new parent governors in order to make it possible

**Table 3: Rural school principals ‘ analysis of the role of parents in the governance of their schools**

<i>Items</i>	<i>Yes</i>	<i>Unsure</i>	<i>No</i>	<i>Total</i>
Parents participating in school governance interact with principals regularly on school governance matters	3420	00	14080	174100
Parents participating in school governance interfere in curriculum issues that they do not have any knowledge on	15287	00	2213	174100
Parents participating in school governance cause some principals to feel that they lose control over their work	10460	1810	5230	174100
The absence of capacity building programmes minimizes parent participation in school governance	174100	00	00	174100

for them to perform their functions and to develop their capacity to take on school governance functions (Potgieter et al. 1997).

### **Problems Encountered By Rural School Principals When Attempting To Effect Parent Participation In School Governance**

This section was an open-ended question, where school principals were required to mention the problems they encounter when trying to engage parents in the governance of their schools. In analysing the responses, the problems were ranked in the order of frequency as follows:

Parents participating in school governance are:

- Either illiterate or semi-literate (76%).
- No experience in school governance (67%).
- Irregularly attendance of school governance meetings (57%).
- Negative attitudes towards school principals (52%).

### **Rural School Principals' Suggestions on Improving Parent Participation in the Governance of Their Schools**

In another open-ended question, school principals were required to make suggestions on what can be done to improve parent participation in school governance. In analysing the responses, the suggestions were ranked in the order of frequency as follows:

- Parents participating in school governance should be literate (80%)
- The Department of Education to introduce literacy classes for parent participating in school governance (74%)
- Training workshops should be organised for parents participating in school governance (66%)
- School governance should be redesigned to form new patterns of collaboration and empowerment of school principals and parents (62%)

### **CONCLUSION**

This study explored the views held by rural school principals on parent participation in school governance. Although the participants were supportive of parent participation in school

governance, their views also illuminate challenges associated with implementing school governance activities. One of the great challenges is the illiteracy rate of parents involved in school governance, who should be playing a significant role in school governance activities. However, they lack the knowledge and the training to do so. It is essential for them to be given the necessary training, which should include the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge so they would be in a position to participate meaningfully in the school governance activities.

### **RECOMMENDATIONS**

In conclusion, the study outlined the rural school principals' suggestions on ways of improving parent participation in school governance, which included, among others, the following: parents participating in school governance to be literate, the Department of Education to introduce literacy classes and the initiation of training workshops for parents in school governance.

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