

Challenges of Parental Involvement in Rural Schools

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ABSTRACT This paper reports on the findings of a research project which sought to explore the challenges of parental involvement in rural public schools. It reflects at the misuse of democratic rights by those who are power hungry and love recognition at the expense of democracy, and how their involvement hampers quality public education in South Africa. The paper argues that parental involvement is a constitutional imperative which must be embraced properly by all those with vested interest in sustaining quality public education. The paper further argues that public education is being infiltrated by strangers who do not have the interest of education at heart. This paper makes an appeal to parents to make an informed decision about their participation on governance issues, their involvement must be able to contribute towards quality public education. In order for this to happen, parents should be capacitated to become actively involved as equal partners in school governance issues and other educational activities in public schools. The research project was based on qualitative research design. The participants included two officials from the area office, five principals from the cluster, five teachers; five learners from participating schools and five chairpersons of School Governing Bodies that served as cases in the research. Purposive sampling was used to select the participants. Literature review, document analysis and interviews used for data collection. Qualitatively derived data was analysed using critical discourse analysis. Involvement of parents for wrong reasons was cited as number one challenge, Also interference of other colleagues in the management issues and

lastly failure by the department of education to capacitate parents on issues relating to school governance was hinted as another great challenge. Based on these findings it is recommended that the needs to implement regular capacitate building workshops to parents on school governance issues.

I. INTRODUCTION

South Africa has inherited a fragmented and racially divided education system which impacted negatively on the rural communities. What rural schools are experiencing today comes as a direct result of the impact of the system and which is hard to overcome. Interest amongst researchers and policy makers has started to shift to factors outside school that might contribute towards improvement in learning, and it is increasingly being acknowledged that support provided at home by parents and other family members can also play a crucial role in how well children perform at school.

The ongoing tension in schools amongst principals and governing body member is a cause for concern. It shows that after almost 18 years of democracy education has not yet stabilise .Some members of the school governing body get elected into the governing structure for wrong reasons other than assisting in improving the quality of public education and as such gang against the management of schools almost in everything, they do, as a result this hampers effective schooling and management. This is against the ruling party's vision that democratic school governance structures are needed in order to fully develop the potential of the human resources of the country on assuming the reins of government in 1994.

The situation in rural public school needs much to be desired. The quality of public education is compromised by the way our stakeholders handle educational issues. In some schools teaching and learning is hampered by those without interest in the quality of results at the end of the year, Most time is wasted on a series of fruitless governing body meetings which do not necessarily benefit the learners.

It is accepted and common knowledge that parents and children have expectations of each other. Parents love their children, and want nothing but the best for them; they are responsible for their children's education and want them to achieve in school. They are accountable for what

eventually happens to their children after formal education is over. Parental involvement in school setting is a sensitive issue which must be handled with care.

II. METHODOLOGY

The study is located in the class of qualitative research design. The qualitative approach looks at the events in their natural setting and the meanings people attach on them (Mouton, 2001). This entails that there is no social reality, but different interpretations held by individuals and groups. The qualitative researchers therefore are concerned with the interpretive understanding of human experiences of the phenomena. MacMillan and Schumacher (2010) add that qualitative research typically investigates behaviour as it occurs naturally in non-contrived situations, thus there is no manipulation of conditions or experiences.

Population and sample

Purposeful sampling was used in this study in order to solicit specific data. Burns (2000) argues that in purposeful sampling participants are selected because they serve the real purpose and objectives of the research. Purposeful sampling entails selecting participants for a particular purpose because they are information-rich. In this study the sample comprised of two officials from the district office; five principals from the cluster; five teachers from each school; five learners of participating schools; five School Governing Body chairpersons of selected schools that served as cases in the research. The group was relevant because it would be able to provide rich information about the importance of parental involvement in the teaching and learning of their children.

Data collection methods

Data were obtained through face- to- face interviews; document analysis. The interviews were open-ended and they allowed the researcher to probe and ask in-depth questions. Further, the interviews allowed participants to express their opinions and ideas in their own without being pressured (Esterberg, 2002).

All interviews were tape-recorded and transcribed verbatim. From these transcriptions, quotes are included in the article. Low-inference descriptors are used. Informal member checking enhanced validity of findings.

Data analysis

Data was analysed using analytical descriptive approach which aimed at providing an analytical description of promotion of public involvement of parents in rural public schools (Mouton, 2001). In this context the steps followed in analysing data were as follows:

Transcribing raw data; organising and preparing data for further analysis; reading through all data; coding the data in order to form themes and categories which ultimately enable the researcher to interpret the meaning of themes (Creswell, 2009).

The ethical issues

Permission to conduct research was requested from department of education and the school authorities. It must be emphasised that no participant was coerced to be part of the study. The purpose of the research was explained; participants remained anonymous. Participants' privacy was respected and their safety was guaranteed.

Trustworthiness of the report

This report complied to the suggestion advocated by Maree (2010) that multiple methods of data collection such as interviews, observation and document analysis which should be used for confirming trustworthiness. In addition, involving several investigators and peer researchers to assist with the interpretation of the data also enhance trustworthiness. To test the extent to which the study measured whatever it was measuring consistently (Best and Khan, 2003); categories of the frequency occurring data were identified and checked. Since the main issue of reliability is dependability data was established by capturing all interviews on a tape recorder and transcribed in writing. During the transcription exercise only irrelevant information was omitted from the transcription and all attempts were made to reproduce the interview scripts as accurately as

possible. Interviews were unbiased and researcher avoided asking leading questions in his interview.

III. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This section presents findings which are basically based on the experiences of participants.

Illiteracy

The study identified illiteracy as one of the major factors that militate against the parents', meaningful involvement in school. A parent who is illiterate cannot read and write as a result cannot assist his or her child with anything that requires reading and writing. They cannot also function effectively as treasures and secretaries of the governing bodies of their schools. Cooter (2006) differentiated between functional illiteracy and intergenerational illiteracy. A functionally illiterate parent is an adult who does not have adequate reading skills to fill out a job application, read a food label, or read a story to a child. These individual often lack the literacy skills needed to find and keep a decent job. Heystek (2004) argues that:

In a school where parents have limited skills, knowledge or experiences and even lower level of literacy, they may find it difficult or impossible to assume responsibility for drafting and managing the budget and it now becomes the burden of the principal.

Socio economic factors

It was revealed that many of the participants came from families affected by poverty and most learners live with either their grandmothers because their biological mothers are away from home or have passed away. Most lived on shacks and mud made houses. Parents were unemployed and survived on government social grants and as such they are challenged by their daily struggle for economic survival. Research has found that parents' socio – economic status is seen as the determinant of their level of involvement in the education of their children. Barbour et al. (2008) write that many children from this class of are at risk, meaning that nutrition and health care are minimal, and illness, diseases and neglect are common. It is recommended that school managers develop a strategy by which to identify such learners so that they can provide necessary support to their families, because they learn and develop in the family as well as the school. Risimati (2001) maintains that schools support families by providing opportunities to strengthen parenting skills, enhance parental networks and minimise the stresses of parenting.

Lack of effective communication

Participants' responses revealed lack of honest, two way communication between the school and families. Principals and teachers showed that they used written communication, such as letters, newsletters and memoranda to communicate with parents. It is commendable to use these methods, but it is a one way form of communication. Therefore it is recommended that school managers should have scheduled times for parent/teacher contacts spread throughout the year, such as general parents meetings, home visits by teachers, school visits by parents and parent-teacher conferences. Cox-Peterson (2011) recommended that school managers must employ multiple communication methods.

Barriers to parent involvement

Many barriers were cited during interviews as hindrance for lack of parental involvement by participants. Barriers such as time factor, lack of skills, poor communication channels were mentioned. Most of these barriers are realistic, however, school managers should assist parents in ensuring that they support their children in order to succeed in school and life in general. Cox-Peterson (2011) writes that all barriers which challenge the development and sustainability of educational partnership will have to be acknowledged, addressed and overcome in order for partnership to be successful. Many governors in rural areas have limited skills because of their low literacy level and a "negative attitudes towards school activities" (Heystek and Louw, 1999). This is not unique to South Africa as Creese and Early (1999) stress that a growing body of research shows that schools in disadvantaged and deprived locations are less able to recruit governors or to find governors with the necessary skills and expertise that schools require.

Lack of capacity

The study revealed that most of the Participants expressed concern in relation to their lack of skills and capacity which can assist them in discharging their governance related issues. Lack of financial skills was referred to on many occasions, and they blame it on the department of education for failing to provide them with the necessary continued capacity building workshops.

Mestry (2004) states that some members of the School Governing Body used to be excluded from financial decisions; that treasurers lack financial skills and merely sign cheques, which they are not sure of. As a result lack of effective financial control measures was identified.

The South African government remains committed to a long term goal in the schooling system wherein all schools become responsible for managing the non personnel funds received from the state (Department of Education, 1993). The School Governing Bodies should have the capacity not only to manage finances well but also to translate these financial resources into physical resources that will be most cost effectively to promote quality education.

Members of the school community need to be equipped to analyse budgets and financial statements and where necessary to manage finances. In many rural schools “poor communities tend to lack access to resources, information or organisational skills to appropriately influence decisions about education or other social services” (Mathonsi, 2004)

Document analysis

From minutes it was discovered that the entire work is being carried out by Principals such as invitations of parents and School Governing Bodies for meetings, copies shown were signed by the Principals without the Secretary’s signature.

School Governing Bodies’ minutes were formally written by administration clerk with a well polished language. Some Principals decide on financial matters and projects schools.

Educators and parents expressed concerned and made an appeal for thorough training and capacity building workshops. The parents and some teachers also complained about how some principals ill -treat and undermine School Governing Body members.

IV. RECOMMENDATIONS

- The department of education should provide regular capacity building workshops and basic reading, mathematical and writing skills to be added to the training manuals for SGB parent component during their training sessions.
- Parents should be encouraged to take advantage of institutions such as Adult Basic Education and Training and enrol in order to deal with the challenges of illiteracy.

- Principals need to be trained on new approaches to management such as co-operative management and paradigm shift in school leadership and management issues.
- Teachers and principals must be orientated on departmental legislations such as the South African Schools Act and be made aware on the dangers of ignoring the contents thereof. Although most parents are illiterate, they should also be broad on board about what the Act stipulates and requires of them.
- Parents should be motivated and be shown their importance as key stakeholders in the education of their children.

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- Learners

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