

The Involvement of Governing Bodies in School Administration in the Vhembe District, Thulamela Municipality: The Realities on the Ground

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ABSTRACT The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) stipulates that all public schools should have School Governing Bodies (SGB). The SGB concept is one of the ways in which communities can be involved in the running of their schools. However, despite the good intentions of the education authorities, SGBs especially those in rural areas have not been operating smoothly. This is either because they have not been properly trained to understand their duties or they are not adequately schooled to understand the concept of governance. Community involvement in school governance is not a bad idea but it should be carefully planned, implemented and monitored for it to be successful. Communities and school authorities should see each other as partners. Partnership can only be achieved and maintained if there is harmony between all stakeholders. This paper looks at the performance of SGBs, particularly the realities on the ground in rural areas in the Vhembe District, paying attention to their functions and some of the problems emerging as they go about performing what they believe to be their functions and duties. The paper recommends ways in which SGBs can be effective in their work.

INTRODUCTION

Since the dawn of democracy, all stakeholders in the school are expected to play an active role in school governance. This responsibility cannot be left alone in the hands of government to see to it that there is smooth running in the schools. At secondary schools, parents, teachers, non-teaching staff, learners and the community must also share their ideas on how the school is to be administered. According to Harris and Houlihan (2015: 30), the School Governing Bodies (SGB's) should possess in relation to legislations and the application of the knowledge make an impact in the administration and management of the school. For schools to function efficiently, the School Governing Bodies need to know that the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996) is the supreme law that has an impact in all education legislations, policies and regulations. Therefore, whatever school policy is to be developed should appreciate the Constitution.

According to Maake et al. (2013: 105), since the establishment of the School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in South Africa in 1996, all public schools are required to have SGBs of elected members as part of the governance structure. They write that SGBs comprise of parents of

learners, learners and teachers in a school. The principal by virtue of his/her position is an automatic member of the SGB. The parent component of the SGB form the majority part and they have a crucial role to play, as they are a vital link between the community and the school. This paper looks at the performance of SGBs, particularly the realities on the ground in rural areas in the Vhembe District, paying attention to their roles and functions and some of the problems emerging as they go about performing what they believe to be their roles and functions. It would hopefully come out with some suggestions on how their activities can be properly coordinated, streamlined and also improved. Maake et al. (2013: 106) maintain that the rationale for the establishment of democratic structures of school governance is to ensure that teachers, parents, learners and non-teaching staff participate actively in the governance and management of schools with a view of providing the right environment for teaching and learning.

School Governing Bodies

Epstein and Dauber (1988: 24; Nong 2007) indicate that the main forms of parent involvement in schools are:

- parent involvement at school (for example volunteers or assistants);
- parent involvement in learning activities at home (for example assisting children at home, home tutors);
- home/community – school relations (communication); and
- governance (advisory councils) (Avvisati et al. 2011: 769-770).

From the above, it is evident that the SGB concept is actually a way for parents to be actively involved in the running of the schools in which their children are learners. Badat and Yusuf (2014: 130) point out that the SGB concept is not entirely new in South Africa as there used to be School Committees in the apartheid era. The researchers however are of the opinion that the difference is not only in the change of name as they seem to suggest but rather in the fact that SGBs are backed by government legislation and expected to perform far more complex tasks well beyond their capabilities. The South African Schools Act pronounces that there are two important teams with different responsibilities that play a crucial role in teaching and learning environment.

The first team is the School Management Team (SMT) and the second team is the SGB. According to Heystek (2004: 310) and Mncube (2009: 40-41), the latter team is responsible for governance or the strategic management of the school. Maake et al. (2013: 106) are of the view that the SGB is the strategic director of the education business at the school. It has the responsibility of planning and budgeting, setting objectives, oversight, organizing and staffing and resource allocation. For instance, SGBs are expected to interview prospective teachers to be employed by the Department of Education to work in their respective schools. It will however be shown in this paper that this is a task well beyond their capability as most SGB members, particularly those in rural areas, as they are mostly either illiterate or semi-literate. Thus they cannot adequately determine the suitability or capability of a candidate for a teaching job. In addition, according to Makgato (2007: 93) the SGB has to see to it that there are skilled teachers and support staff to provide adequate learning and teaching materials to cover the national school curriculum. This is a very complex and highly specialised task which even most trained teachers are unable to perform adequately so

how can the education authorities expect an SGB composed mostly of either illiterate or semi-literate people to excel in this in this regard (Burnitt and Gunter 2013: 58-60).

Thus Sisters (2004) is of the view that some problems that arise in teaching and learning at schools are often due to lack of capacity among SGB members. Their lack of capacity is due to lack of education and capability, leadership and management skills. Furthermore, Heystek (2004) and Palmer (2008) posit that this incapacity is as a result of the fact that the elected members might be school drop-outs and that they are not properly trained after their election as SGB members. Even the training they receive is once-off and not on-going and this is grossly inadequate. This poses a threat to teaching and learning because as indicated by Rothstein (2010: 200) SGB's have a direct impact on teaching and learning because they are involved in the appointment of school staff, especially senior staff.

To add to the predicament or woes of SGBs, the researchers have observed that most of the literature on the functions and duties of SGBs are written in English and very few are in African languages. Furthermore, the legalese dominated nature of the documents make their reading a cumbersome exercise even for an educated person so the researchers do not expect people with barely primary school education to comprehend its contents. The researchers are also of the view that writing the guidelines on the functions of SGBs in only English is a gross violation of the constitution of the Republic of South Africa. After all, the constitution stipulates that all languages spoken in the country have equal status and should be regarded and used as official languages. As Mkhonto (1998: 11) puts it, 'what will happen if an SGB decides that an African language should be used as a medium of instruction in their school?' Furthermore, if and when an SGB takes unpopular decisions and gets taken to court as has happened on some occasions will the government take the blame for not adequately informing the SGB? (Xaba 2012).

Marsh (1992: 167) and Haelermans and de Witte (2012) indicate that it is advantageous for parents to be involved in the running of their school's as there is the chance that the school will develop a strong sense of identity as what is taking place in the school will be a reflection of the community at large. In addition, the inter-

ests of all the learners will be taken into consideration as the different members of the SGB will no doubt have diverse interest and these are likely to cater for all the learners. Furthermore, parents' skills and interests can be used in conjunction with what the teachers are doing in order to enrich the school environment in planning and implementing the school curriculum. For instance, through a government initiative some South African Universities have begun degree programmes in Indigenous Knowledge Systems (IKS). This endeavour has to start at primary and secondary level. The inclusion of IKS in the curriculum needs the involvement of parents for it to be a success. It will become a daunting task if members of the SGB are unable to champion such causes efficiently. Thus parents have to be schooled to comprehend indigenisation of subjects to better their lives and that of others.

Musaazi (1987: 22) and James et al. (2010: 10) is also of the view that once parents are involved in educational matters, they will be able to support and reinforce the learners learning in the home environment. That is, parents tend to have a great understanding and thus appreciate the complexities of schools if they have first-hand experience of the school. This will inevitably foster the development of common purposes between all stakeholders and parents in particular will realise that they have legal and long-term responsibility for their children. As such they should take active part in making decisions which affect their children's lives. Shared decision-making also involves accountability, so the number of legal actions taken by parents against schools will be greatly reduced.

Functions of School Governing Bodies

The South African Schools Act (SASA) stipulates that SGBs should among other functions, govern schools. In specific terms, SGBs are expected to perform two main tasks, and these are referred to as general and allocated functions. While the general functions are expected to be performed on daily basis, the allocated functions can only be performed after permission has been sought from the relevant department of education official, that is, the Head of Department (HOD). In a nutshell, SGBs have to ensure that the infrastructure and properties of the school are developed, protected and maintained. To

achieve this, they have to develop a partnership based on trust and respect between all stakeholders, namely parents, teachers, learners, other staff members, the community and the education authorities (Potgieter et al. 1997: 11; Iliasov et al. 2010). Partnership can only be maintained if there is no conflict between the various interest groups. The question is, is this possible? See Marishane (1999: 56) and Mestry (2004: 128) for possible answers to this question.

In the researchers' opinion, a casual perusal and scrutiny of the functions of SGBs reveal that they are too vague and this is a recipe for disaster as school governors and school managers try albeit unsuccessfully to interpret the School's Act to their own advantage. The researchers have also observed that in the Vhembe District, the power play between SGBs and school managers directly affects the smooth running of schools as they try to usurp each other's power and authority. This, according to Sisters (2004), is mainly because there are misunderstandings about the roles of the school management team and the SGB members. The result is that most of the schools in the Vhembe District are not run properly and members of the school community capitalise on this to do as they please. For instance, most teachers absent themselves from class and learners are absent most of the time. Already the abolition of corporal punishment has left some teachers with few options and no alternative, as that was the only known and effective way of controlling wayward learners in rural areas. From our experience, alternatives such as 'detention' and 'extra school work' are unheard of in rural areas. Besides, teachers see this as a bother as it will involve their staying back to supervise the learners (Ofsted 2010).

The Labour Relations Act (Act 66 of 1996) together with the existence of powerful teacher unions has also made it a near impossible task to discipline teacher. Thus teachers can misbehave and count on their union to intimidate the SGB into submission. In terms of the Labour Relations Act erring teachers are suspended with pay and the case can drag on for years. We have already indicated school governance is not a simplistic affair to be left to the whims and caprices of uneducated folk. That is, we fail to see how inadequately uneducated and untrained people can be expected to set up rules and policies for the smooth governance of schools,

rules and policies which the governors do not understand themselves. If one of the reasons for setting up SGBs is to administer school funds in an appropriate and accountable manner as Mbunyuza-de HeerMenlah(2014: 394) has posited, then it certainly has failed as many rural schools are in acute financial dire straits.

The Situation on the Ground

Most of the problems indicated in this paper arise from the fact that when SGBs were/are elected no serious steps are taken by the education authorities to train and to support them. It is also true that governance officers were later appointed to perform this duty but their competence has been questioned by many school managers (Duma 2014). Thus this lack of training in even the rudiments of the complex art of governance has left the SGBs in a precarious and vulnerable situation. In their overzealous efforts to discharge their duty and also exercise their newly acquired power and authority, they blunder so much that their usefulness is now and then questioned even by the education authorities who brought them into being.

The situation is complicated and compounded by the fact that most of the schools in rural areas were community-owned so even before SASA, there was community involvement in these schools. In fact, all what SASA has done is to arm community members with the false impression that they have unquestionable authority to do as they wish. The result is a confusion of magnanimous, outrageous and gargantuan proportions. A typical example is the Vryburg High School saga, which has left a rift between the black and white communities in Vryburg. Of course, the Department of Education also became an unwilling participant in the fracas as the communities (Whites and Blacks) took turns to take it to court. If clearly defined rules and roles were in place such uncalled for litigation could have been avoided.

In fact, the Department of Education has on numerous occasions been placed in embarrassing and compromising situations when courts have ordered education officials to rescind unlawful decisions taken by SGB. For instance, because of the apparent inability to interpret SASA, some SGB members feel they can get rid of teachers not from their communities to create room for their children who are unemployed.

Furthermore, as is typical of most rural communities in the Limpopo Province, most people in a community are either related through a consanguineous relationship or affinity so it is difficult to deal effectively with situations without allowing so-called family sentiments to interfere. Thus in the Vhembe District, people are greeted either as *s'bara* (a Zulu expression referring to an in-law) or *muzwala* (cousin) and all issues are treated and considered strictly along such family lines. That is, there is a lot of nepotism in the communities. This rather unprofessional and unethical way of dealing with sensitive issues inevitably leads to indiscipline on the part of the favoured and disgruntlement on the part of those who feel left out (Van Wyk 2004: 51).

Furthermore, most of the schools in the area do not have school policies or constitutions because it is simply beyond the capability of the SGB to adopt one and they are not prepared to admit this, else their power base will be threatened and eroded. Where attempts have been made to do this, the mediocrity with which it has been done leaves much to be desired. This therefore, affords educators, learners and community members who are opposed to the SGB to take full advantage and misbehave. There have even been situations where some disgruntled community members have threatened to take the law into their own hands and oust the SGB. This is illegal as SGBs are expected to be elected through clearly defined procedures as outlined in the SASA and once they are elected, they are expected to serve for a specified period of time. In the case of unsatisfactory service or conduct, the said member or members can only be expelled after due process of the law has been followed otherwise their expulsion will be considered *ultra vires* and thus unlawful (Mncube 2007: 135-136).

A major problem is the composition of the SGB. It is not representative of the entire learner body as only learners from grades 8 to 12 are represented on the SGB. With regard to the teachers, sometimes there is a rift between members of the different unions. For instance, in one school, members of the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) who are in the majority connive to have their members elected to serve on the SGB. Thus teachers from the other unions like Professional Educators Union (PEU) are sidelined irrespective of their ability. Women from the community are either not elect-

ed at all or when they are elected; they are very passive and ineffective as the men do not allow them to make any significant contributions to their activities (Pandor 2008).

Another problem relates to the handling of school funds. Before the inception of SGBs, this was done by a member of the school management but with the advent of the SGBs, this responsibility falls directly under their domain. They are not only expected to administer the school fund but also to draw a budget for the school (This is an allocated function). This often leads to tension between them and the school management team, as both parties do not always agree on what is necessary for a school. In some schools, school fees are in fact collected by teachers (class teachers) and because there are no proper mechanisms in place to control them, most of the money ends up in their pockets. Departmental authorities no longer go round schools to audit their accounts so the little money that is submitted by the teachers is either misappropriated by the school management team or the SGB members who because they are mainly unemployed see the school fees as a source of income. Recently some school managers in the Vhembe District area of the Limpopo Province were 'expelled' by disgruntled community members because they were dissatisfied with the way their money was being used by the said principals. Not surprisingly, the school managers could offer no tangible defense, as they could not account for how the school fund was disbursed. The SGBs were also not spared as the communities insisted on their dissolution because they were in cohort with the school managers. The SGB together with the school management team must familiarise themselves with the prescripts of the Public Finance Management Act (PMFA) for them to account for the school budget (Mestry 2006: 28-31).

CONCLUSION

Governing Bodies involvement in schools is actually not a bad concept but what makes it look bad in the South African context, particularly in rural areas, is the fact that the very government whose law brought them into being is doing nothing substantial to maintain them. It is the government's responsibility through its Department of Basic Education to facilitate the training of SGBs on their roles and functions in

school governance. The first step is to establish new relationships between all stakeholders: parents, teachers and learners. New positive attitudes have to be forged and maintained. It must be understood and accepted by all that it is only parents who can have the final say in the education of their children.

The problems and/or issues raised in this paper can however be overcome if the education authorities are willing to implement long and short-term measures as well as invest in time and provide competent personnel to spearhead the training process. Rural communities should see their participation in school governance as an opportunity to contribute positively to the development of their schools but not as a way of settling old scores or getting rid of personnel they perceive as undesirable.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The researchers have already indicated that four ways in which parents can be involved in schools, the School Governing Board (SGB) concept is just one of the ways, so the other ways should also be explored and considered. For instance, the formation of Old Students Association (alumni) will be a good starting point. Furthermore, since the roles and functions of SGBs are outlined in SASA, it is important that there has to be formal training of SGB members. The members have to be rigorously trained and made to understand that they are not expected to be directly involved in the day – to – day running of schools as this will be tantamount to interfering in the educators' professional responsibilities and duties. Thus they have to be made to understand that they are governors not managers. For an accelerated development of rural schools, they can be twinned with the former 'Model C' schools or private schools. This will contribute to greater nation building as learners from the twinned schools can interact more effectively and frequently. In addition, a lot can be learnt from such partnership as the governors, managers, teachers and learners from the rural school will see how things are done in the former 'Model C' or private schools.

The researchers are also of the opinion that a massive campaign involving NGOs, education authorities, and the mass media should be launched to educate rural communities on some of the ways in which they can be positively and

productively involved in the smooth running of their schools. Thereafter, it is hoped that competent people will be elected to serve on SGBs. Efforts should then be made to ensure that the governors have adequate knowledge of the education system and laws pertaining to it, particularly those dealing with the hiring and firing of teaching personnel. They should also be instructed on bureaucratic structures and how policies are initiated and implemented. Thus, they will become effective governors who will be able to exercise their power and authority in an acceptable and astute manner to convert the education system so that it can serve the needs of their respective communities.

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