

## When Devolved Power is Re-centralised: The Adulteration of Deliberative Democracy in School Governing Bodies

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**ABSTRACT** This article reports findings of a study on shared decision-making in School Governing Bodies (SGBs) of township secondary schools. The focus was on the manifestation of power in the shared decision-making process and how it is experienced and perceived by SGB members. The study adopted a qualitative multi-site case study design. Data were collected through semi-structured one session heterogeneous focus group interviews and supplemented with one to one interviews. Data analysis was based on Teschs steps for open coding and it generated a number of themes which form the bases for discussing findings. Findings suggest that the decision-making power that is devolved to SGBs is not enjoyed equally by all members. Rather, it is centred on the principal and some elite group who do not follow the prescripts of deliberative democracy when exercising it. It is argued that since SGB members are not inherently undemocratic, their decision-making practices can be aligned to deliberative democracy tenets through more accountability measures and capacity building.

### INTRODUCTION

Following its inception, the new South African government sought to provide an education system that builds democracy, human dignity, equality and social justice (Department of Education 2001; Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004). To give effect to this ideal, the *South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996* (hereafter SASA) was enacted as a legislative means of redressing past injustices in the education system and promoting the democratic transformation of society. This Act mandates the establishment of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) which are entrusted with the democratic governance of schools. These structures, called the SGBs, are constituted through a school-based process of democratic elections in which the stakeholders as composed of different constituencies elect their representatives. Elected SGB members in every public secondary school include representatives of teachers, non-teaching staff, learners and, parents. Principals serve as *ex officio* members and parents are given a greater say through a 50% plus one majority (Karlsson 2002; RSA 1996). People who are not parents of learners at a given school may be co-opted for their expertise to be SGB members, but without voting rights. The devolution of power to schools is meant to make them more effective and accountable, and to move toward collaborative decision-making, involving principals, teachers, parents and students (Agbo 2002). Other envisaged end-results of devolving power to schools

are: to promote democratic transformation (Mosoge and van der Westhuizen 1998); to give more power and control over education to stakeholders and circumvent unresponsive bureaucracies (Lingard et al. 2002; Bauer and Bogotch 2006); and, to improve communication, planning, decision-making and problem solving (Sharpe 1996; Agbo 2002). It would, therefore be sensible to judge the effectiveness of SGBs in discharging their responsibilities in the context of these broad mandates and the extent to which the benefits associated with devolution of power are demonstrable in schools.

Principals and School Management Teams (SMTs) are responsible for the operational management of schools and SGBs are responsible for the formulation of school policies. Functions of SGBs include, among others, formulating a code of conduct for learners, deciding on the language policy of the school and fees to be charged, overseeing the maintenance and control of school property and, recommending the appointment of staff. A key challenge regarding these functions is that once associated policies are formulated, or the SGB has made its recommendations, their implementation falls under the domain of other role players, not the SGB. For instance, school policies are implemented by SMTs and it is the prerogative of the Provincial Head of Department whether to appoint, or not to appoint, staff members recommended by the SGB. This suggests that the effective implementation of their decisions depends on other people who may have vested interests on issues at

stake. It cannot be assumed that the decision-making power which is devolved to the SGB as a single entity is always exercised through consensus. Members of SGBs have diverse backgrounds and associated interests and expectations which may surface during the decision-making process and undermine objectivity.

It is also noteworthy that SGB members are usually not elected to these structures because of any leadership qualities, nor are they trained into the intricacies of democratic governance immediately following their election. Given these limitations, it is possible for the devolved decision-making power to be concentrated on some powerful elite and serve sectarian interests while maintaining the exclusion and exploitation of others (Sharpe 1996; UNDP 2002). In concurrence, Grant-Lewis and Motala (2004) aver that the representative democracy within SGBs is a system of competition for power and influence. This contention is confirmed by recent studies on SGBs in South Africa which found that while these structures are meant to enhance democratic participation, they are characterised by some undemocratic and exclusionary practices (Heystek 2004; Adams and Waghid 2005; Van Wyk 2007). In this regard, Karlsson (2002) maintains that inequalities, social class, race and gender issues that characterised the education system under apartheid are still promoted in SGBs. Brown and Duku (2008) further add that what prevails in SGBs is an ethos of social domination, rejection and the resultant tension and psychological stress. The study reported in this article was conceived of against this apparent contradiction between the democratisation and effectiveness goals of devolving power to SGBs and their reported undemocratic practices. This article is restricted to the question: *How do SGB members perceive and experience the exercise of power during SGB decision-making?* It is inconceivable that the goals of devolving decision-making power to SGBs can be realised if SGB members do not embrace and promote democratic values, processes and practices in their interactions.

### Literature Review

Deliberative democracy is the conceptual framework that bedrocks this paper. This is informed by the apparent inextricable link between devolution of power and shared decision-making.

The devolution of power to schools is said to be aimed, among others, at collaborative decision-making and problem solving (Sharpe 1996; Agbo 2002). Similarly, the gist of deliberative democracy is the legal institutionalisation of the right of people to participate in deliberations, without exclusions (Habermas 1996, Mafora 2000; Adams and Waghid 2005). This means that power is devolved to schools, in this case the SGB, in order to be shared not to be re-centralised on some exclusive elite that monopolises it. The new policy dispensation seeks to redress past exclusions and it requires educational leaders to build relationships and share decision-making (Brown 2004).

This article shares the view that power is the ability to get things done by influencing decisions that precede them (Mintzberg 1983). In the context of SGBs the exercise of power refers to the ability of all members to influence policy-related decisions that are made. Conversely stated, any SGB member who cannot influence decisions that are made cannot be said to have power, even if participating in SGB processes. This view is shared by Grant-Lewis and Naidoo (2004) who argue that participation should translate into the right to influence decisions. This right must not just be espoused, but must be exercised in practice. Adams and Waghid (2005) point out that this power must be attained legitimately through elections, and be exercised without force, but with accountability to the electorate. The use of force in SGB deliberations is, therefore, inexcusable as it is neither a democratic practice nor can it be said to be done on behalf of the electorate.

According to Gutman and Thomson (Paul et al. 2000) deliberative democracy is the practice of justifying policies and decisions through discussions by free and equal citizens or their representatives. In the context of SGBs deliberative democracy entails involving all stakeholders recognised by SASA in the shared decision-making process. Although SGB members are invariably diverse and may hold competing values and interests, effective participation in the process requires that they should discard such values and interests, and pursue those that are common. These can be identified through the very process of discussions and debates. In this regard, Waghid (2002) points out that for deliberative democrats, it is the process that people establish to participate, to talk and reason over

matters until a collective decision is reached that justifies democracy. This suggests that more than the participative structure itself, it is the nature of the participative process that qualifies decision-making as democratic. Participation must be anchored on principles of freedom and equality. People's differences of age, race, ethnicity, religion, identity, socio-economic background and other dimensions should be acknowledged. But, none must be used as the basis for unfair discrimination and suppression. Rather, differences should be used to enrich the discussions and debates. All participants must enjoy the free expression of opinions and be protected from covert or overt barriers to free expression. In addition, participants must be free to differ and reach own conclusions (Adams and Waghid 2005). This means collective decisions, no matter how pressing, must not be pursued by suppressing the views of individual participants. Consensus does not mean that all participants should be forced to agree with a decision or consider it the best one under the given circumstances. It would, however, suffice that every participant was listened to and none feels their conviction was violated (Liontos 1993).

Deliberative democracy does not imply that all collective decisions should be accepted uncritically. Decisions that are made should be just. If perceived to be unjust, decisions must be questioned, even if they are made by the majority because no amount of deliberation can legitimate an unjust decision (Gutman in Mafora 2000). Decisions made by the majority under pressure without the requisite deliberations, or merely to avoid an impasse should also be questioned (Adams and Waghid 2005). When decisions are made by a diverse group like the SGB, which is also characterised by unequal power relations, it is common for people who perceive themselves as wielding little or no power to be afraid to openly express their opinions, particularly if such opinions differ markedly from, or are critical of, opinions of the relatively powerful (Bommaert and Verschuere 1998; Mafora 2000). Where some stakeholders are not listened to, due to overt or covert marginalisation, they cannot be said to have power. This amounts to an adulteration of democracy and it results in SGBs structures, processes and relationships being experienced as unjust. Concerted efforts must, therefore, be taken to create an environment conducive to the free expression of ideas. All partici-

pants must feel valued and treated with dignity during decision-making. They must experience the process and its outcome as fair and reflective of their inputs, not just those of the dominant or preferred group. Given the custodial role of principals in SGBs, creating such an environment should be their responsibility. Associated literature (Harber 1995; Mafora 2000; Crocker 2004; Adams and Waghid 2005; Mncube et al. 2011) suggests that a genuinely democratic climate that is facilitative of deliberative discourse is typified by:

- ♦ Unwavering commitment of all members to democratic values, principles and procedures;
- ♦ Equality of all people on the basis of their human dignity, irrespective of their age, gender, religion and other differences;
- ♦ Equal protection of all people against unfair discrimination and suppression;
- ♦ The use of rational discussion, not force or threats, to generate views that inform decisions;
- ♦ Equal treatment of all opinions expressed during discussions, without regard for the personal circumstances of those expressing them;
- ♦ The acceptance or rejection of ideas on the basis of their worth, not their source; and,
- ♦ The sacrifice of individual and sectarian interests in pursuit of the common good.

The researcher's contention is that devolution of power to SGBs should find practical expression through deliberative democracy. The latter enjoins SGB members to create an environment that promotes active uninhibited participation of all stakeholders. They must treat each other as equals who have opinions that warrant to be listened to, and to be questioned only on the basis of their substance or lack thereof. It discourages undemocratic tendencies meant to influence the direction of decisions like the formation of cliques; unfair discrimination and suppression; and, manipulation and coercion. The extent to which this can be achieved will depend on the effectiveness of the programmes designed to build capacity of the members of the School Governing Bodies. Such programmes are critical because SGB members cannot suddenly be expected to know about democratic principles and practices just because of their election. It is said people are not inherently democratic, and being democratic is difficult

(Scanlon, in Crocker 2004; Rukambe 2009). According to Gould's (cited by Adams and Waghid 2005) the development of a person over time should be an aspect of freedom accorded individuals. Providing such training would, in terms of Gould's conception, enhance SGB members' freedom and effectiveness in the shared decision-making process.

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative multi-site case study approach was adopted to answer the research question because it enables the researcher to understand social phenomena from the participants' perspectives and in their natural setting (McMillan and Schumacher 2006). The purpose of the study was to ascertain the meanings and also the understanding ascribed by SGB members to the concept of shared decision-making process and their own perception of how effective is their governance role in the running of the school. This article is restricted to the question: How do SGB members perceive and experience the exercise of power during SGB decision-making?

Five secondary schools were selected purposively from Soweto's Johannesburg West-D12 Education district. Three schools are located in the original township while the other two schools were situated in an informal settlement. The socio-economic milieu of these schools was considered a possible catalyst for high levels of political consciousness and activism that may influence perceptions about democracy, power and related social justice issues in schools. Most families have working class, low socio-economic backgrounds. They live in four room council houses, rooms in other people's backyards, or self-erected structures in informal settlements. In a recent study of Soweto households, Gray et al. (2006) found, among others that, 11% of children had lost a parent; 44% of households had at least one sick adult and could not pay school fees for their children or assist them with homework. The literacy level of most parents is usually low and it is common for teachers to be the most highly qualified members of low socio-economic communities (Van Wyk 2004). This results in skewed power relations in the SGBs. The informal settlement in which the two schools are based is considered to be one of the seven most deprived wards, out of 109, in the City of Johannesburg. It also has the worst levels of food

insecurity, highest recipients of child support grants and female headed families (De Wet et al. 2008).

From each school all current SGB members, except for parents, were selected. These were the chairperson, the principal, two teachers, three learners and, one professional support staff member. Convenient sampling on the basis of availability was used to select three parents from the current SGB and two teachers and two learners from the previous SGB. Permission to conduct the study was obtained from the Gauteng Department of Education. Participants were informed that their involvement was voluntary and that they could withdraw at anytime from the study. They were assured anonymity and confidentiality.

Data were collected through one session from homogenous group interviews at each participating school. Individual one-to-one interviews were conducted for teachers who could not participate in group interviews. Audio-recorded interviews were transcribed verbatim and coded. Themes and categories were generated from the analysis of the transcripts following Tesch's steps for open coding (Creswell 1994).

### FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The outcome of data analysis suggests that the majority of interviewed SGBs do not observe democratic values. While the structures are democratically constituted through free elections, in the main, their processes and relationships flout the guiding principles of deliberative democracy. These findings are discussed below, under three broad themes which have some overlaps.

#### Misapplication of Deliberative Democracy

The majority of SGB members do not seem to understand the essence of democracy and the practice of shared decision-making. Although such a basic understanding would be expected from teachers and principals, but they were found to be wanting. Their responses revealed some disjunction between their views about democracy and their practices. While all principals expressed a commitment to democratic values like equality and non-discrimination, the majority appeared to think that such values can be suspended when protecting their posi-

tions as headmasters. The majority of principals do not view themselves as equal to other SGB members. Their common view is that they are the legitimate decision-makers who should influence decisions as they are finally accountable to the Department of Education. Consistent with other findings (Grant-Lewis and Naidoo 2004), they view other SGB members as playing a supportive role to theirs, which is to make decisions and provide advice or clarify issues to other members. This view is patronising and suggests that it is only principals who are more knowledgeable about everything and can unilaterally decide what is in the best interest of the school. It undermines principles of equality, rationality and tolerance (Adams and Waghid 2005). The irony is that none of the SGB chairpersons who were interviewed ever question principals' domination. This is probably attributable to their limited understanding of deliberative democracy. The majority of SGB chairpersons seem to think that being administrative heads of schools elevates principals above other SGB members, including themselves, in human dignity and importance. It was reportedly common in surveyed schools for chairpersons to connive with, and take instructions from principals. One SGB chairperson remarked:

*Before meetings I meet my chief [reference to the principal] and we discuss things. I must know what he thinks before the meeting so that we do not disagree before people. He knows what the school needs and the parents [SGB] must help. I make sure they do. If we disagree with him nothing will work, nothing...*

It emerged from data analysis that the majority of parents in SGBs think that it is incorrect to differ with the principal and that those who do are an aberration. In this regard, parents from one school boasted about frog-marching a fellow SGB member out of a meeting because he had accused the principal of maladministration. Thus, for these SGB members, rationality and evidence are not the basis for considering the acceptability of views, and it is acceptable to use threats of violence against those with different opinions. Although teachers could question the undemocratic practices of principals, their practices reported by other SGB members and confirmed by themselves, suggest that they too have a limited understanding of deliberative democracy. It is reportedly common for debates between teachers and principals to degenerate

into verbal fights and teachers staging walk-outs. Parents and learners reported that teachers always question their ability and competence to participate in discussions "*just because [they] are not educated*". This prejudice was confirmed by a teacher from one school thus:

*How can we discuss matters with people who do not understand the issues, it is a waste of time. Learners should be in class improving their grades, not disagreeing with us on things they do not know. Parents who have not been to school have no business coming through the back door as decision-makers, they must stay at home and discipline their children and leave the decisions about schools to us.*

It appears to be this apparent misunderstanding of deliberative democracy that helps entrench principals' hold to power and militate against other SGB members effectively questioning their practices. It is inconceivable that SGB members can willfully decline to exercise their rights when they fully understand what deliberative democracy entails.

### Factionalism

Findings suggest that in the majority of SGBs the representation and presence of different stakeholders does not translate into participation as envisaged by deliberative democracy. Representatives of different constituencies do not enjoy the same recognition and level of participation, and not all members of any constituency are free to participate. A common sentiment from the majority of respondents was that principals tend to form coalitions of convenience with other SGB members perceived to be knowledgeable or influential. Only members of such cliques participate freely during deliberations. They also form the principal's support base for handling dissent and limiting the participation of others. It was noteworthy that parents from all SGBs conceded to forming their own cliques on the basis of friendship, language group, zone of residence, gender and other dimensions. Although socio-economic status was not mentioned as the basis of forming their cliques, it is ironic but consistent with other findings (Ministerial Review Committee 2004; Brown and Duku 2008), that the majority of parents perceive themselves as victims of marginalisation because of their low socio-economic status. During meetings members of cliques reportedly support each

other and oppose the rest. Views are not supported because they are more rational or plausible (Adams and Waghid 2005) but because of *who* holds them, and who is likely to benefit from the decision outcome. It appears some SGB members are not believed to hold any views of substance. They are not treated with dignity and respect and their views are ignored. One school principal suggested to me that it would not be advisable to interview a cleaner who was a member of their SGB as, “*she knows nothing and would not have anything sensible to say*”. It is reasonable to believe that this is how this cleaner is treated in the SGB. An illustrative comment from one support staff member was:

*Yes, I participate. I ask questions and try to contribute but, I do not get support from anyone because I am not a teacher, I am not a parent, just an administration officer. Sometimes I just keep quiet. Yes, because you can see when people think you don't know what you are saying. As you speak, they also speak. So, you sit and let them talk, because they know better...*

The majority of parents conceded that when a matter is put to a vote, they tend to support what they presume to be the principal's preferred option, not what they truly believe in, because they “*do not want to be seen to be against the principal*”. Dissent is usually not a viable option as it reportedly takes just a hostile stare from the principal's inner-circle parents to intimidate other parents and learners to change their vote. Unlike parents, the majority of teachers reportedly take a stance that is always oppositional to the principals' views. They are, however, unable to effectively challenge principals' stranglehold on power as they fail to get support from parents. The formation of cliques and factions weakens deliberative democracy in that it divides SGB members. As warned by Adams and Waghid (2005), instead of striving for sharing the decision-making power equitably, all SGB member groups aspire to exercise it exclusively and for advancing their interests at the expense of other groups' interests.

### **Abuse of Power and Inconsiderateness**

Although SASA specifies the functions of the SGB, and outlines exceptions for learners, findings suggest that it is not only learners who do not participate in deciding certain issues. Rather, consistent with other findings (Grant-

Lewis and Motala 2004), the majority of respondents claim that through subtle manipulation of processes and procedures, principals and those in their inner-circle influence who participates in deciding which issues. Contrary to the assertion that parental involvement should not be restricted to school premises and fundraising (Conley 1991), the majority of parents reported that their inputs are valued only when decisions about fund-raising activities are made, not when other finance matters and associated processes like purchases are discussed. The norm appears to be that parents get reports after the fact. This flouts SASA and the deliberative democracy requirement that all citizens must have equal participation opportunities, except where exclusions can be justified on the basis of reasons agreeable to all (Cohen 1971; Looyen 2000; Adams and Waghid 2005). In this case defensible exclusions are only those specified by SASA.

The researcher shares the view that teachers, learners and parents possess different skill levels (Adams and Waghid 2004), and that people must only be involved in making decisions about which they have interest, knowledge and competence (Watt 1989). However, it amounts to blatant abuse of power when principals use the limited knowledge level of SGB members to manipulate them and determine their participation rates. On being appointed, SGB members should be provided with skills training that can enhance their effectiveness in discharging their responsibilities. In the majority of SGBs chairpersons are reportedly reduced to ceremonial heads. While they preside over meetings, they never give direction to proceedings independent of principals. Rather, they give other SGB members little time to debate and deliberate on issues, but are quick to “hand over” to principals, or to “*seek the principal's guidance and advice*”. This degrades SGB meetings to consultancy sessions where principals and those close to them provide expertise to the SGB, not shared decision-making by equal citizens.

Except for principals and chairpersons, all groups of SGB members reported experiencing abuse of power and suppression by members of some other group, not just principals. Ironically, no group perceived itself as suppressive. One parent made this suppression-laden comment:

*At home I am a father and a parent and I am not equal to children. Why here in the SGB?*

*Learners are just children and cannot speak to me like they want. This equality thing is wrong if it takes away my culture of being the head. We can work together but not be equal to women and children.*

This confirms the view that SGBs are terrains of contested power (Sharpe 1996; UNDP 2002; Grant-Lewis and Motala 2004) and those without access to power cannot influence decisions. This is given credence by what emerged as a common concern from parents and learners that only circumstances of the dominant groups are considered when logistics for SGB meetings like times, language and procedures are decided. This militates against broad-based participation because members who are late or absent from meetings that are scheduled at inopportune times are unable to influence decisions. Similarly, it defeats the equal participation requirement if some members are present but cannot follow proceedings because of the barriers of language and formal meeting procedures (Mncube 2009).

### CONCLUSION

This study has uncovered that the majority of school principals do not make decisions collaboratively with all SGB members. Decisions on major issues are made with a select few or group decisions are not implemented, suggesting the abuse of power. Those privileged to make decisions with the principal are not necessarily the most competent to do so. Rather, they are people chosen because they help advance the principals' personal interests and concerns in some way. On the other hand, those who are perceived as threats, or who do not serve the interests of school principals are marginalised and excluded from deciding critical issues like school finances and staff appointments. Besides covert manipulation and tokenism, the use of threats and intimidation was found to be common in SGBs. Based on these findings, it is reasonable to conclude that in the sampled schools the power to make decisions is not shared by all SGB members, but is centred around, and dispensed by school principal. They do not only influence who may, or may not, participate in the process, but determine issues that are open for discussion. This, however, does not suggest that school principals and their SGB allies are inherently undemocratic.

It is noteworthy that, while the majority of parent members may not be as sophisticated and conversant with issues around democracy and school governance, it is not only because of their fear of victimisation and limited knowledge that school principals are in the position to dominate the decision-making process. Rather, this is made possible by the general lack of unity of conviction and purpose between and within different groups represented in SGBs. It was found to be only a minority, notably teachers, who question school principals' dominance and undemocratic practices. The majority tends to gravitate towards school principals with a view of being beneficiaries of their favour, while others are excluded. Because of the concentration of power on the principal and site-based elites, the SGB decision-making climate, process and outcomes are not reflective of deliberative democracy and social justice.

### RECOMMENDATIONS

Practices uncovered in this study point to the devolution of power to SGBs not serving the intended purposes. To address this anomaly, school-level policy frameworks that inform governance practices should spell out the roles and responsibilities of school principals in relation to those of other members. Accountability should be enforced through an SGB code of ethics that binds all members. Without such measures, deliberative discourse will remain an adulterated mirage. After they are elected SGB members should be formally inducted to familiarise them with the demands of their new roles and the associated rights and responsibilities. This should be followed by continuous training on specific issues on leadership and democracy that are relevant to SGBs.

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