

The possible cause of school governance challenges in South Africa

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School governance in South Africa is about the single most important factor in education that appears to experience apparently insurmountable challenges. In this article I explore and analyse school governance challenges to find their possible cause. A qualitative study using interviews was conducted with principals, educators and parents as school governing body members. The results of the empirical investigation reveal numerous challenges in school governance, which challenges seem to be mainly related to school governors' ability or inability to execute functions prescribed by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (hereafter referred to as the Schools Act). An analysis of the challenges strongly indicates that these challenges are possibly caused by the nature of the prescribed functions, which require specialised skills and knowledge to execute. This is manifested in the various reasons advanced by school governors, such as the apportionment of blame among themselves. It is therefore concluded that school governing bodies are not really succeeding in facing the challenges of their roles and responsibilities and that the possible cause for these challenges resides in the specialist nature of most prescribed functions themselves.

Introduction and background

School governance in South Africa is the single most important factor in education that seems to experience apparently insurmountable challenges. Considering that more than a decade has passed since the enactment of the South African Schools Act, it seems that efforts to have effective school governance fall far short of their intended outcomes. Despite various attempts aimed at training and capacity building of school governors, including financial resources having been expended for this purposes, studies abound with reports of numerous challenges in the governance of schools in South Africa (Heystek, 2004; Dieltiens, 2005; Grant-Lewis & Naidoo, 2006; Brown & Duku, 2008).

Basic among the school governance challenges, is the capacity to govern. While the provincial departments of education, through functional units at head offices and at district levels, have engaged in the training of school governing bodies (SGBs), the actual enactment of these roles is often less than ideal (Tsotetsi, Van Wyk & Lemmer, 2008:385). The very essence and effectiveness of the training that school governors receive are often questionable. Among other training constraints, Mabasa and Themane (2002:112) report that SGBs are not trained before they start their work and this manifests in problems such as unfamiliarity with meeting procedures, problems with the specialist language used in meetings, difficulties in managing large volumes of paper, not knowing how to make a contribution, not knowing appropriate legislation, feeling intimidated by the presence of other members who seem knowledgeable and perceiving their roles as simply endorsing what others have already decided upon. This can be attributed to irrelevant and inadequate training of SGB members, which does not really address

the core functions of school governance.

Mestry (2004:126) highlights an important challenge in SGBs, namely, lack of the necessary knowledge and skills for financial management and, consequently, the inability to work out practical solutions to practical problems. Mestry (2006:133) also points out lack of collaboration between the principal and other SGB members with principals being unwilling to share responsibility for school governance for fear of losing power. Another challenge, articulated by Van Wyk (2004:51) relates to educators in SGBs feeling that other SGB members (an obvious reference to parent-governors) lack confidence and are not sure of their duties. In this regard, Maile (2002:239) contends that illiteracy among SGB members, especially parent-governors, may contribute to their own inefficiency and argues that this is possible because illiteracy precludes parents from accessing relevant information. To this end and in relation to the problem of illiteracy, Van Wyk (2004:50) points out that many SGBs, particularly in less advantaged areas, do not have the required skills and experience to exercise their powers.

Another governance challenge is that of allegiance to constituencies. In one study, Xaba (2004) found that educator-members of SGBs see themselves as "watchdogs" whose role is that of "fighting" for educators' issues. In that sense, Xaba argues that SGB members' roles are made difficult by how they gain membership to the SGB, that is, through a constituency support base, which seems to suggest that they serve the interests of their constituencies, which makes it difficult to promote the best interests of the school. Nonetheless, schools have to be, and continue to be governed. Indeed, many attempts at building the capacity of school governors continue to be made. For instance, at provincial departmental level, special units have been established to deal with school governance and at district and local levels, there are officials tasked with school development and support, which include school governance support. Regardless of the level of effectiveness of such capacity-building initiatives, SGBs continue to experience governance challenges. Numerous research studies identify factors located in the functional ability of SGB members as responsible for the failure of SGBs to govern schools effectively and execute their roles and responsibilities as prescribed by the Schools Act (Mestry, 2004; Chaka, 2005).

While not exhaustive, challenges regarding the roles of SGBs outlined above indicate the difficulty of schools governance in South Africa. Such challenges seem to be located mainly in the implementation of the functions and roles prescribed in the School Act. This raises questions of whether these challenges are simply and solely due to school governor incapacity or whether there is another possible cause behind them. To this end, this study sought to answer the questions:

- What are the school governance challenges as viewed by school governors?
- What is the possible cause of school governance challenges?

I sought to analyse school governance challenges to understand their possible cause. To this end, I purposely examined perceptions of SGB members regarding the execution of their governance functions as prescribed by the Schools Act.

Conceptualisation of school governance

For purposes of this study, school governance is conceptualised on the basis of school governance roles and functions as outlined in the Schools Act. According to section 20(1)(a) of the Act, the major role of the SGB is to promote the best interests of the school and to strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education. Squelch (2001:140) states

that the school governing body, standing in a position of trust towards the school, must furthermore act in good faith and not engage in any unlawful conduct or conduct that may jeopardise the interests of the school. This implies that all SGB members must synergise their operative efforts towards the provision of quality education for learners.

Serving and promoting the best interest of the schools also find expression in roles detailed in Section 20(e-j), which include supporting the principal, educators and other staff of the school in the execution of their professional functions. This includes roles and functions such as administering and controlling the school property, buildings and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels, and recommending the appointment of non-educator staff at the school to the Head of Department, subject to the Public Service Act, Proclamation No. 103 of 1994, and the Labour Relations Act, No. 66 of 1995.

In addition, the Schools Act stipulates functions allocated to SGBs. According to Section 21 of the Schools Act, these are functions given to SGBs when they apply for them and only if the Head of Department is satisfied that the SGB can perform them (Department of Education, 1997:32). The Schools Act stipulates allocated functions as the SGBs' ability to maintain and improve the school's property, to determine the extra-mural curriculum of the school and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy, to purchase textbooks, educational materials or equipment for the school, to pay for services to the school or other functions consistent with the Act and any applicable provincial law. These functions factor in an important skills-based and expertise-based requirement of financial management and accountability. This implies that, since they receive public funds, SGBs must disclose to all stakeholders plans showing where the funds come from, what they were intended for, what they will be used for and when and how they will be used. It must also be disclosed how and when the funds were used and who benefited from such utilisation (Republic of South Africa, 1999). Therefore the requirements attendant on the execution of Section 21 functions seem to present an enormous challenge for SGBs in that they require expertise.

Method

Setting

Historically disadvantaged schools, mainly townships schools, were purposely a focus of interest because, as reported elsewhere in this text, they have been identified as experiencing serious governance challenges. The schools from which participants were drawn are situated in a large township area south of Johannesburg, which started as an informal settlement. While developing, it is still largely characterised by features common in most informal settlements, *inter alia*, poverty, unemployment, orphaned children and poor basic services in the community.

Participant selection

Participant selection was purposeful and dimensional, so as to focus on those variables in the population that are of interest to the investigation (Strydom & Venter, 2002:207; Merriam, 1998:61). According to the former authors, dimensional participant selection entails only a few cases to be studied in depth and ensures that each population dimension or stratum is represented, which in this research consisted of principals, educator-governors and parent-governors. This was informed by Strydom and Venter's (2002:207) assertion that the researcher purposely uses his or her judgement so that those elements contain most of the characteristics or typical attributes of the population. This also applied to decisions regarding the number of participants

actually to be included in the interviews. In this regard, participant selection is thus relatively limited and is based on saturation, is not representative, the size is not statistically determined and is non-probable (Strydom & Delport, 2002:334). In line with this assertion, and as a result of purposeful considerations, participant selection dimensionally targeted five principals, 16 educator-governors and 24 parent-governors, all from primary schools in the area. The selection, however, was sequential and was determined by saturation and informational considerations (Strydom & Delport, 2002:336). For the sake of convenience, the interviews were conducted at schools, after school hours. All interviews were conducted in English except for three parent-governors who preferred to be interviewed in isiZulu.

Data collection

A qualitative design with a phenomenological strategy was used to uncover perceptions of school governors, and as advanced by various authors on qualitative research (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003:38; Gay & Airasian, 2003:13) this enables one to understand human behaviour and experience better, to focus on phenomena that occur in natural settings and in their complexity, and to obtain a deep understanding of how participants perceive things. It also allows researchers to maintain a physical presence in the research setting. Semi-structured one-to-one type interviews with open-ended questions were used to gather descriptive data in participants' own words so that insight could be developed on how they interpret the challenges in their roles and functions as school governors (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003:95). Interviews were thus conducted with an open orientation, which allowed for direct two-way conversational communication, and were organised around areas of particular interest, while allowing for considerable flexibility in scope and depth (Leedy & Ormrod, 2005:76; Greef, 2002:298). Participants were interviewed on the basis of availability as against membership of a specific SGB. This is because the aim was not to compare SGBs, to analyse by quantifying or to generalise, but to understand school governors' views. This also ensured that accounts proffered were not necessarily views from one or a few schools as represented by a number of participants.

Data analysis

Data were organised into smaller units in the form of main concepts, sentences and words, which involved a *verbatim* transcription of tape-recorded data and noting the tones of voices, emphases used, pauses and silences and unclear or indecipherable responses (*cf.* Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2000:282). Finally, data were arranged in categories denoting how SGBs executed their roles and functions in historically disadvantaged schools, which then culminated into the writing of the research report. Direct quotes were used to capture what the participants themselves articulated. This, combined with the narrative form of the report, allows the participants, as it were, to "speak" for themselves.

The whole interviewing process was done with due consideration for ethical aspects in qualitative research, during which participants' informed consent was obtained and their right to privacy and anonymity was respected. Consequently, pseudonyms are used in the report. Because this study did not intend to conduct a comparative analysis of schools, no reference is made to the schools to which participants are attached.

Findings

Emergent themes revealed four main challenges schools governors face in executing their school governance roles and responsibilities. The first challenge relates to difficulties in rea-

lising the main role of the SGB, namely promoting the best interests of the school. Chief among the reasons for this difficulty involves SGB members' perceptions of what this role entails. Members of SGBs seemed to operate from different positions concerning this role. For instance, in pursuance of this role, principals largely saw themselves as tasked with teaching other members, particularly the parent component, their roles, and acting as mediators in conflicts between educators and parents in the SGB. To this end, one principal remarked that he could not say they were successful in executing this role as, "*I still have to face and strive to teach these people*" (referring to the members of the SGB), which sentiment was echoed by another principal who commented "*We still have a lot of challenges. One of the challenges we face, is the need to take parents on to our level, in terms of understanding their roles and responsibilities*". As a matter of fact, it seemed principals' roles revolve around ensuring peace among educators and parents as expressed by another principal who stated: "*I am trying to close a gap between the parent and educator components*" and added: "*I am helping them to perform their duties. Our SGB is responsible for everything, but I have to consistently help and guide them, to the extent that I end up doing most of their functions*".

Educators blamed the difficulty in promoting the best interests of the school on parent-governors' low education levels, which, according to them, resulted in parent-governors being unable to execute their roles and responsibilities, being easily manipulated, unable or unwilling to participate in decision making and continually absent from meetings and workshops. The following comments best illustrate these sentiments:

"Most of our governing body members (meaning parent members) are not learned. In most cases where there are workshops, you found [sic] our SGB members not attending the workshops, due to a fact that their illiteracy part will be exposed".

Another obstacle in promoting the best interests of the schools seems to relate to the constituency base of SGB members. Educators felt that their constituencies often put them under pressure to support them (the constituencies) even when this was against the best interests of the schools. This, they claim, is because they were elected by the constituencies. For instance, one educator stated that because educators had elected them, they expected their support regardless of issues under consideration, which happened mostly with cases of appointments to promotion posts and when educators had to be identified for redeployment purposes due to low enrolments or changing curriculum needs of the school.

Parents cited difficulties involving other parent-governors and educator-governors as creating difficulties in promoting the best interests of the schools. They concurred with educators that most parents were not educated and as a result, were not confident in carrying out their school governance responsibilities. In addition, lack of commitment, poor attendance of meetings and lack of knowledge were cited as contributory factors.

However, most parent-governors identified the relationship with educators as the main difficulty. Seemingly educators undermined parent-governors because of their low education levels. One parent stated: "... *they regard us as illiterates. When we voice our concern as SGB members, educators do not acknowledge our inputs. As a result, we end up being passive and disillusioned.*" This view was corroborated by principals. One principal stated:

"Educators at times believe that they understand their roles and responsibilities better than anybody else. You find educators overstepping their roles, especially when it comes to financial matters. ... They regard themselves as one structure and parents as another structure, which, in turn, creates two centres of power within the SGB".

The accounts expressed by principals, educator- and parent-governors indicate serious difficulties regarding the most basic school governance function, that of promoting the best interests

of the school. This was further highlighted by views that related to lack of team-work among school governors. These accounts can only mean that SGBs find it a real challenge to cooperate harmoniously to promote the best interests of their schools.

The second challenge relates to misunderstanding roles pertaining to school governance and professional issues. For instance, some parents felt they were hamstrung by not being able to deal with matters of educator misconduct and learner discipline. They felt that to assist the school, it would be more effective to allow them to be involved in such matters as governors and parents. They cited laws often punted by educators to prevent them from being involved. In this regard, one parent commented: "*We as governors cannot charge an educator for the use of corporal punishment since it is a professional matter and not a governance matter. Unfortunately*", she added, "*we can only report to the principal and more often than not, these matters remain unresolved or take time to be resolved*". This view was echoed by another parent, who pointed out that, because most SGB members were not educated, they could not distinguish between governance and professional management roles. He emphasised that since there were overlaps in the two roles, there were often challenges in areas such as disciplinary action against staff members and the day-to-day running of the school, for example, because these roles were often confused in terms of governance and management.

The third challenge relates to difficulties in policy development, formulation and implementation. Sadly, this was attributed mainly to parent-governors' low education levels and lack of knowledge regarding the implementation of policies. In this regard, one principal stated: "*The challenge once more is the level of parents' education. As always, it ends up being a one-man race, where I, as principal, explain everything to every member. I end up doing things myself.*"

Another principal indicated that the SGB relies on the inputs of educators in the drawing up and implementation of policies. In this regard the SGB acted as a "rubber stamp". Parents also expressed a feeling that, due to their lack of know-how, they relied on educators to draw up school policies, even though educators sometimes took advantage and "*make policies to suit teachers*". Views expressed by the participants included the following:

"We struggle a lot as the SGB in drawing up policies. We struggle and rely heavily on the inputs that are made by the staff, as opposed to us, SGB members".

Parents also acknowledged that due to their own lack of knowledge, educators mostly drew up school policies. One parent stated:

"Truly it is very difficult when coming to the issue of school policies and the implementation thereof. We made a lot of mistakes when drawing policies due to a lack of knowledge and skills. We instructed the principal and the teachers to implement the policies".

Educators also cited parents' lack of knowledge as making it difficult to develop policies that were a product of all school stakeholders. Typical comments included the following:

"Educators are the ones who are actively involved in drawing school policies and the parent component is passive. Our parent component is not conversant with SASA and the Constitution. Therefore, it is difficult to use SASA and the Constitution to draw the school policies".

The fourth challenge relates to the management of school resources, in particular, financial management and facilities maintenance. Financial management was clearly and by admission from all the participants, a real challenge. There were problems with budgeting, balancing expenditure and budgeted income, using correct procedures regarding the use of finances and deviations from the budget. Participants' accounts pointed to poor or no financial management

savvy at schools. Some participants were quite open about the reasons for poor management of finances at schools. One comment from a principal seemed to capture the essence of the problem:

"We have a huge challenge in this regard. The SGB as a whole lacks the necessary financial management skills. We do not have anybody who is qualified, who has enough expertise in the financial management area, budgeting and accounting".

A parent also candidly expressed an opinion that corroborated the above view:

"We are experiencing problems with regard to finances. We have not reached a stage where we are really sure that we have received full information, skills and knowledge with regard to school finances. I'm not satisfied with the way we have been trained. The training took three days which was far too short for such a huge responsibility".

The fact that school governors did not really have financial management knowledge and skills was expressed in frustrations about numerous factors. The first relates to the budgeting processes and the implementation of the budget. An educator expressed frustration over non-adherence to the budget. She stated: "*Our budget exceeds the allocated funds. It does seem we fail or do not know how to budget*". The second relates to conflicts in the SGBs regarding finances. One participant, an educator, stated: "*They (educators) demand to do things their own way. They force deviations from the budget. They actually make everybody uncomfortable in the SGB. As a result, it is difficult to exercise proper financial control*", while a parent also remarked:

"Accounts on financial management depict a bleak state of affairs regarding financial management at schools. Even more important is the realisation that with the disbursement of large sums of money to Section 21 schools, proper financial management is quintessentially a must".

It appeared also that schools generally fell short of proper school facilities maintenance. The major reason in Section 21 schools appeared to be the small financial allocation for maintenance, while in Section 20 schools the reason seemed to be the department's inability or failure to carry out maintenance projects at schools. Consequently, SGBs often failed to ensure well-kept and maintained facilities. In addition, a principal of a Section 21 primary school reasoned that they could not maintain the school properly because Section 21 funds were deposited late at the school and that the allocated funds were far lower than the maintenance requirements.

A major challenge mentioned by all participant governors in terms of school property and facilities pertained to burglary, theft and vandalism. This necessitated regular routine and corrective maintenance, but in light of the shortage of maintenance funds, schools often had to prioritise those facilities that were essential. The following remarks aptly highlight this challenge:

"... We repair this, it is broken. We install security equipment, they still manage to break in. The damage is big. The money we get for maintenance is so little. It simply does not cover all the maintenance needs of the school. For example, some things remain unrepainted because there are other priorities".

In addition to the problems listed above, some parents pointed out that their schools did not have maintenance policies and, if they had them, these policies were not implemented, which was similar to sentiments expressed by principals and educator-governors. In this regard, a parent stated: "*We do not have a policy regarding maintenance of school property, buildings and grounds*".

It must be stated that there were numerous positive aspects of the execution of governance

functions mentioned by different participants. However, for the purposes of this paper, the report focuses on challenges mentioned in order to answer the research question(s).

Discussion

Two issues seem particularly pertinent to school governance challenges. Firstly, there are challenges in executing governance functions, which confirms various studies as alluded to earlier. Secondly, the possible main cause of governance challenges seems to be located in the prescribed functions themselves.

In terms of executing governance functions, it is clear that the lack of capacity to execute the governance functions is the main challenge and this is manifested in various defensive behaviours. For instance, principals and educators tend to apportion blame for the difficulty of executing these functions to the parents' low levels of education. In turn, parents blame educators for undermining them and looking down upon them because of their so-called illiteracy, while educators blame principals for being undemocratic and influencing parent-members of SGBs. A factor that further complicates the execution of governance functions (in terms of promoting the best interests of the school together), is the attempt by elected governors to watch over the interests of their constituencies. This, as pointed out earlier, runs against executing the very core of the school governance main role. Roos (2009:58) expresses the ideal governance situation thus:

“Although governors are elected on a constituency basis once they are elected they are all equal governors of the school. Their responsibility is to govern the school within the framework provided and not to represent the sectoral interests of the group from which they are drawn”.

However, in practice, the matter of equal governors, all in pursuance of the best interests of the schools has proved difficult, as found in participants' accounts. This is not only a local challenge, but is reported as a challenge worldwide (Bush & Gamage, 2001:42).

The misunderstanding of school governance roles versus professional matters and the lack of capacity to develop policies and govern the management and usage of resources, both physical and financial, are manifestations of, on the one hand, poor training of school governors and on the other, the nature of school functions. Indeed, most functions prescribed by the Schools Act require highly skilled functionaries with specialised knowledge in areas such as, *inter alia*, financial accounting, facilities maintenance and policy development and formulation. For instance, devolution of decision-making to schools requires SGBs to execute several responsibilities, including school-based budgeting, local interpretation and application of national policies (such as language and religious policies), maintenance of school sites and facilities, and the power to recommend the employment of educators and employ additional staff (Dieltiens, 2005:9).

Interpreting national and provincial policies and translating them to school policies require knowledge of and skill in policy development and formulation. In this regard, Grant-Lewis and Naidoo (2004:112) argue that the bureaucratic listing of SGB roles and responsibilities requires that SGBs be trained to understand the legalese, be familiar with the Constitution, the Schools Act and various provincial education Acts, as well as departmental regulations and circulars. They furthermore need to understand regulations outside of education such as labour laws and regulations related to procurement. This also applies to issues pertaining to financial management and accountability. As a result of poor ability in this regard, most governance functions are deferred to educators and principals, which in itself creates tension from other governors being dominated and acting as "rubber stamps" of decisions taken without their full under-

standing and involvement (Grant-Lewis & Naidoo, 2006:423).

It is also noteworthy that the Schools Act prescribes a rather ambiguous role for the principal. According to Section 16(a) of the Education Laws Amendment Act 31 (Republic of South Africa, 2007), two of the functions and responsibilities of principals of public schools are stated as follows:

- The principal of a public school represents the Head of Department (HoD) in the governing body when acting in an official capacity.
- The principal must assist the governing body in the performance of its functions and responsibilities, but such assistance or participation should not be in conflict with stipulations of the Department of Education.

The difficulty with the role of the principal as set out above seems to be when does he/she represent the HoD and when does he/she promote the interests of the school as a fully-fledged member of the SGB? This difficulty is compounded by the requirement that the principal must assist the SGB in the execution of its functions and responsibilities. The question is whether the principal, by being required to assist the SGB, is him/herself not perceived as a member of the SGB. This role might have a tendency to position the principal above all other members of the SGB and thus create conditions for his/her dominance, which contradicts the notion that once in the SGB, all members assume equal status as governors. Indeed, this may be so, simply because the principal is a permanent member of the SGB and, as such, acquires better insight and knowledge of governance issues over the period of his/her membership of the SGB. This, in my opinion, perhaps explains the reason why principals consider themselves as mentors to other governors.

Conclusion and recommendations

Accounts from participants in this study paint a picture of school governance beset with challenges of executing governance functions. It is clear from the participants' responses that there are difficulties in understanding governance, mainly because governors perceive their roles differently, which detracts from their main responsibility — promoting the best interests of the school. This, combined with less than adequate capacity-building as required by the School Act, adds to the ineffective execution of functions. It is therefore crucial that these challenges be addressed. Bold action, including a consideration of amendments to the Act is thus necessary.

It seems very plausible that the possible cause of school governance challenges is located in the specialist nature of the prescribed functions themselves. The most prudent way of addressing these challenges lies, therefore, in the functions prescribed by the Schools Act itself. Firstly, a reclassification of functions into categories of expertise could address the challenges inherent in the functions themselves. It is recommended that full-time posts for specialised functions like financial management and resource management be created, either at schools or districts. Functionaries appointed to such posts would then deal with these functions on the basis of individual schools or school clusters, thus assisting governing bodies and simultaneously playing an overseeing, monitoring and controlling function.

Secondly, training aimed at capacity-building should be based on situational factors pertaining to the capacity needs of schools themselves. A capacity assessment is necessary in this regard, to avoid a "one-size-fits-all" approach to training and development. That way, for instance, governing bodies would benefit from customised training programmes. Furthermore, a dedicated governance unit at district level should be established to render continuous and consistent support to governing bodies in the district.

Finally, it may be necessary to reassess terms of office of school governors. Three years is rather too short a term for governors to learn and master the execution of governance functions in a way that engenders continuity. It would be profitable to extend the terms of office to at least five or six years to ensure that governing bodies can establish themselves effectively. The permanent membership of principals evidently enables them to understand issues pertaining to school governance.

This study indicates that, while school governing bodies do not really succeed in dealing with the challenges of their roles and responsibilities, these challenges are not only located in their functional abilities, but are inherent in the specialist and skills-based nature of the prescribed functions themselves. While these findings cannot be generalised to all governing bodies in the country, and even to all historically disadvantaged SGBs, the findings of this study provide some valuable insights into the challenges of school governance in South Africa. The study was also limited by the target population being primary school SGB members only. A much more comprehensive, perhaps longitudinal study that include SGBs from other sectors of the schooling system, may add more insights to the phenomenon of school governance challenges.

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