

The perceptions of parents of their role in the democratic governance of schools in South Africa: Are they on board?

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I argue that parent participation in SGBs is an important ingredient in building democracy in the schooling system, as well as in the wider society of South Africa. At some schools in South Africa, parents are not yet playing their full role as governors mandated by legislation. Parents at some rural schools are reluctant to participate in the decision-making by School Governing Bodies (SGBs) as a result of their low educational level or of power struggles in SGBs. In some former model C schools, on the other hand, lack of participation is related to a level of education of parents in general, lack of education on parental involvement in school activities, a fear of 'academic victimisation' of their children, language barrier, and difficulty in attending meetings. This lack of involvement is at its highest in school governing bodies. It appears therefore that while representation and debate are theoretically open and fair, there are still factors that inhibit SGBs from operating democratically. Although the political control of apartheid has gone, issues related to full democratic participation have not been resolved.

Introduction

In 1994 South Africa became a true democracy after decades of oppression and inequality. As part of the transformation process, the Department of Education (DoE) published a White Paper on Organisation, Governance and Funding of Schools (DoE, 1996) to foster democratic institutional management at school level. All stakeholder groups were to be accorded active and responsible roles to encourage tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (Mncube, 2008; Republic of South Africa, 1996). The South African Schools Act 84, 1996 (SASA), which came into effect at the beginning of 1997, emanated from this White Paper. In terms of this Act, all public state schools in South Africa must have democratically elected School Governing Bodies (SGBs) comprising parents, learners, educators, non-teaching staff and school principal. Their functions include creating an environment conducive to teaching and learning, developing a mission statement for the school, promoting the best interests of the school, ensuring quality education for learners, safety and security of learners, deciding on school-uniform policy, disciplinary action and policy regarding determination of school fees.

This move was motivated by the need for greater democracy in education both nationally and internationally (Mncube, 2005, UNICEF, 1995; UNDP, 1993/4/5). According to international researchers listening to parents, encouraging their participation and giving them more power and responsibility (i.e. greater democratisation) all result in a better functioning school (Apple, 1993; Bean & Apple, 1999; Davies, Harber & Schweisfurth, 2002; Davies &

Kirkpatrick, 2000; Harber, 2004; Moggach, 2006). Apple (2001) offers a powerful critique of the different strands in new right-wing thinking on education in America on neo-liberalism, neo-conservatism and authoritarian populism, and suggests that these ideologies work against democracy and social justice in society as a whole, as well as in schools. The role of parental involvement in education has been receiving greater interest. Epstein's model of parental involvement suggests that home/school communication should be a two-way communication and reflect a co-equal partnership between families and schools (Lemmer & Van Wyk, 2004). Furthermore, Epstein (1987) argued that educators, who work with parents understand their learners better, generate unique rather than routine solutions to classroom problems and reach a shared understanding with parents and learners. Moreover, parents who are involved develop a greater appreciation of their role (McBride, 1991). Parental involvement in education has been associated with a variety of positive academic outcomes including higher grade-points averages (Gutman & Midgley, 2000), lower dropout rates (Rumberger, 1995), fewer retentions and special education placements (Miedel & Reynolds, 1999), writing (Epstein, Simon & Salinas, 1997), Mathematics (Izzo, Weissberg, Kasprow & Fendrich (1999), and increased achievement in reading (e.g. Senechal & LeFevre, 2002). However, Grolnick, Benjet, Kurowski and Apostoleris (1997) questioned the feasibility of home/school partnerships. They argued that the adoption of such a policy is not beneficial for learners of lower socioeconomic status (SES) and that the involvement of parents does not diminish the gap in attainment between learners of different SES groups (Feuerstein, 2000; Lareau, 1987). Epstein (1991) raised questions about the presumed positive relationship between involvement and achievement, concluding that gains are higher on some achievement tests, but not mathematics tests. Epstein claims that gains in achievement may occur only in subjects in which parents feel confident about their ability to support their children's learning.

Much information remains unknown about how parents decide to be involved or not in their children's education. In the next section I attempt to address this gap of what the cause is of parental reluctance to take part in school activities.

Discussion of democratic school governance

Edge (2000) defines school-level governance as a radical form of decentralisation. The school becomes the primary means of stimulating and sustaining improvements. On the basis of his study on the transfer of control at the local level in New South Wales, Johnson (1994), argues the merits of this. He argues that the needs of each school are best determined at local level, as each community (and therefore each school) has distinctive needs.

In South Africa, school governance refers to the institutional structure entrusted with the responsibility or authority to formulate and adopt school policy on a range of issues which include school uniforms; school budgets and developmental priorities; endorsement of the code of conduct for learners,

staff and parents; broad goals on the educational quality that the school should strive to achieve; school-community relations, and curriculum programme development (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2008; Sithole 1995). School governance structures create an opportunity for all stakeholders (including community representatives) to develop a sense of ownership of the school and thus take responsibility for what is happening at the school (see Bean & Apple, 1999).

Chapman, Froumin and Aspin (1995) provide a useful list of characteristics of democratic institutions as a framework for school governance. They suggest that policies and actions are based on decisions and are not arbitrary; and that the will of the majority prevails whilst the rights of minorities are preserved and respected. In a school situation, this implies that powers and responsibilities should be distributed among all stakeholders in the school in accordance with the law and that policies should be formulated after rigorous deliberations. Section 16 of the SASA states clearly that the day-to-day professional management of the school should be the responsibility of the principal and the governance of the school remains the responsibility of the SGBs. In practice, parent governors are not all participating fully yet since many of them lack the necessary skills to perform the duties assigned to them. In such situations, the principal continues to perform the functions now supposed to be the responsibility of the SGBs (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2008).

As Giddens (1984) explains, governance of schools is a political activity, because it deals with both allocative and distributive resources, as well as involving education professionals and lay people who have their own views on what school is about and the way in which it should be organised (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2008). Power relations therefore remain central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate: they are “an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of the school governing bodies as organizations” (Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008; Deem, Brehony & Heath 1995:133). This is what makes school governance a complex issue and why some functions such as the appointment of staff, language policy and decisions about school fees have tended to be problematic (Sayed, 2002).

Karlsson (2002) cautions that, instead of warding off the South African apartheid era inequalities in power struggles, social class, gender and race, SGBs in South Africa tend to exacerbate them (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2008). Parents who are excluded from making crucial decisions on matters affecting education of their children are an instance of this. Like McPherson (2000), and in my own research (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008), I found that the functioning of SGBs varies from school to school. Because of the greater managerial expertise among the parents, former model C schools operate more effectively than other schools; and there are also vast differences between urban and rural schools.

For the purposes of this article, democratic school governance refers to

the transfer and sharing of power between the state and the school since schools are in the best position to know and understand their own needs, and therefore should be fundamentally self-determining. Democratic school governance implies that all the stakeholders, including parents, decide on school policies which affect the education of their children. This points to a genuine handing over and sharing of power with concomitant responsibility and accountability, rather than a shifting of accountability and responsibility as most commentators suggest.

Research problem and aim

In this study I set out to investigate whether parents are actively participating in democratic governance in South African secondary schools and whether their participation is related to their knowledge about their responsibilities. Participation of parents in school governing bodies (SGBs) was chosen as the most common arena in which the interplay of power relations between professional and lay governors takes place. My research, conducted in 2004 for a PhD thesis, revealed a lack of black parental participation particularly in SGBs of the former model C schools.

The following research questions were identified:

- What are the actual functions of the SGBs in which parents actively participate?
- What are the causes of the lack of parental participating in school activities?
- Is parents' participation in governing bodies related to their knowledge of their responsibilities?

Research design and data gathering

To address the research question, an inquiry was undertaken using a mixed methodology of qualitative and quantitative approaches and the data were collected in two phases of data collection. The first phase of the research included the use of in-depth interviews, observation, and reading of source documents. As in my previous research (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008), the use of interviews was done in order to understand the internal dynamics of the functioning of a small sample of SGBs in secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The aim of using interviews was to get "under the skin" of the organisations concerned to reveal the opinions and experiences of various governors regarding the involvement of parents in SGBs and other school activities. First, 32 semi-structured individual interviews were conducted to explore the views of school governors (SGs) about parent participation in SGBs. Each of these interviews was approximately 40 minutes long. A common interview schedule was used for all the participants, regardless of their constituency. In each SGB the following categories of governors were interviewed: a chairperson of an SGB; the principal; two teaching staff governors; one non-teaching staff governor; two parent governors, and two learner governors.

I also observed two formal meetings of SGBs in each school. Robson (2002) contends that observation makes it possible for a researcher to experience what happens in the real world. Informal observations — in other words unplanned observations — were therefore undertaken. In addition, source documents were examined. These documents were used to complement the other methods used for data collection, and to enhance accountability. Documents were therefore not necessarily studied for substantive evidence. The main documents used were agendas and minutes of SGB meetings, letters to parents, annual reports to parents, disciplinary records and curriculum materials. For ethical reasons access to documents and records was negotiated in advance (Mncube, 2008).

During the second phase of data gathering a questionnaire was used, with the specific aim of involving a significant number of schools, i.e. to reach a wider population of respondents for issues of generalisability. A questionnaire was used to establish whether when democracy is advocated and practised in schools, parents are appropriately informed of their responsibilities. This questionnaire was sent to 500 parents in 10 schools in KwaZulu-Natal in September 2006. Of the 500 parents, 430 returned their completed questionnaires. The schools were carefully selected to ensure that all race categories would be included in the sample so I had comparative data on the involvement of parents along democratic lines in schools with different cultural and economic backgrounds. The categories were as follows: three rural schools, two township schools, three former model C schools, one former Indian school, and one former coloured school. A common questionnaire, compiled in English, was used, as English is regarded as a *lingua franca* in South Africa. However, the use of English only excluded the participation of at least one parent from an Afrikaans school who did not respond to the questionnaire. The reason given was that it was not available in Afrikaans. This was a lesson for future research.

A variety of strategies was used to achieve as high a response rate as possible. Questionnaires were hand-delivered by 500 Grade 11 learners. Instructions were simple and all the questions could be answered in a very short time. Since the instrument was designed for easy analysis, the closed questions used required only tick-box answers. To compensate for the low level of literacy among some of the respondents, I asked learners with illiterate parents to assist their parents to complete the questionnaire. (This is the reason why Grade 11 learners were chosen to distribute these to the parents.) The learners' 'assistance' could possibly have had some influence on the reliability of the data. However, since most of the parents had at least basic literacy levels, only a small number of parents had to rely on their children to answer the questionnaires.

Data analysis

The data obtained from in-depth interviews and observation were analysed by means of procedures typical of both qualitative and quantitative research. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and responses grouped according to

the questions asked. Excel was used for the initial data analysis before the governors' responses to each question were studied to see what they revealed about respondents' opinions and beliefs about parental participation in SGBs. Tables were used to give a clear overall picture. Data obtained from questionnaires were analysed using simple quantitative procedures only. The focus was on the number of responses per item in a questionnaire. Negative responses were used in discussions, which enabled me to critically analyse issues of parental participation in school governance.

Sample and description of case study schools

Pseudonyms were used for the schools to ensure confidentiality. As already indicated, selection of the four secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal was not randomly done. These schools were chosen to reflect the apartheid racial classification. The schools are defined as follows: one former Model C school (as explained earlier), a coloured school ('coloured' refers to a person of mixed racial heritage), a rural school and a township school. These are schools that were used in my research on school governance (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008). Information about each school was obtained prior to the fieldwork. This study builds upon the research conducted in 2004; as such the schools forming the sample are similar to those in Mncube (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008).

Buchanan Secondary School is a former model C co-educational secondary school situated in pleasant urban surroundings in a rural town in KwaZulu-Natal. The local middle-class neighbourhood is racially integrated, but white residents predominate. The school is privileged compared to the other three schools: the buildings are large and well maintained. Six hundred and twenty-two learners are enrolled at Buchanan and there are 28 educators. The majority of teaching as well as non-teaching staff are white. Only 60% of the learners can afford to pay the school fees (R5 000 per year); 40% qualify for fee exemption.

Hillside Secondary School is a co-educational secondary school formerly reserved for coloured learners, although Indian learners have been admitted since the end of the apartheid era. Most educators are coloured, but there were Indian and black staff members as well. The school is relatively advantaged and offers a wide range of academic subjects. The surrounding community comprises middle-class as well as working-class residents. Half the learners commute from the surrounding rural areas in search of better quality education. According to the chairperson of the governing body, the school does not have the financial resources to repair the school buildings, which were vandalised some time ago. Only 40% of the learners can pay the R1 200 school fees; the rest qualify for fee exemption. The school has an enrolment of 800 learners and has 22 educators.

Village Green Secondary School is a co-educational rural school in Melmoth. It offers academic subjects and is attended by ethnically homogeneous black learners (IsiZulu speakers). The school is relatively disadvantaged, but

is better resourced than many other rural schools. It has, for example, an electricity supply. However, the number of classrooms is inadequate, and as many as 95 learners sometimes have to crowd into a single classroom. All members of the teaching staff are black. The local community consists of a few working-class families; the rest of the community is unemployed; the unemployment rate in the area is very high. The buildings are in reasonably good repair for this type of school. Seventy percent of the learners qualify for fee exemption as parents are unable to pay the school fees (R150 per annum). Education authorities regard this as one of the better rural schools in the region. The school enrolls 575 learners per year and has 17 educators.

Melbourne Secondary School is a co-educational township school near Empangeni which is attended by black learners only. It offers academic subjects. This township school is better off than most rural schools. It has an adequate number of classrooms compared to Village Green Secondary School. Nevertheless, the classrooms are still overcrowded with approximately 75 learners per classroom. All members of the teaching staff are black and speak IsiZulu. The buildings are relatively well looked after and were renovated 10 years ago. The school enrolls 790 learners per year and has 24 educators. Fifty percent of the learners cannot afford to pay the school fees of R300 per year, thus qualifying for fee exemption.

It is important to emphasise that the sampling was not random, so these findings cannot be generalised to schools in South Africa or even to all of the schools in KwaZulu-Natal. More qualitative and quantitative research of a longitudinal nature needs to be carried out on in this area before generalisations will be possible.

The school fees paid by learners are based on the national poverty distribution table which is in Section 109 of the National Norms and Standards for School Funding. In order to address the issues of poverty in South African schools, the government targets are the same for all learners, regardless of the province they are in. The national poverty distribution table is used by the provincial Departments of Education to allocate funds to schools.

For example for 2007 the school allocation in each quintile (from NQ1 to NQ 5) was as indicated in Table 1.

Table 1 National table of targets for school allocation for 2007–2009

| | % allocation | Amount |
|-------------------------|--------------|--------|
| NQ1 | 30.0 | R738 |
| NQ2 | 27.5 | R677 |
| NQ3 | 22.5 | R554 |
| NQ4 | 15.0 | R369 |
| NQ5 | 5.0 | R123 |
| Overall | 100 | R492 |
| No-fee school threshold | | R554 |

Adapted from the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (DoE, 2006)

Table 1 shows that those schools in the national quintile 1 receive 30% of allocation (i.e. R738 per learner); while those schools in the national quintile 5 receive an allocation of only 5% (R123 per learner).

Research findings and discussion

The actual functions of parents in school governing bodies

Section 20 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) stipulates the functions of SGBs (Department of Education, 1996). To establish whether parents actively participate in SGBs, the following question was put to governors from the four case-study schools: 'What are the actual functions of parents in the school governing body?' The responses reflect what governors think the actual roles of parents in the SGBs are, or should be, rather than the functions stated in the SASA. Table 2 reflects the variety of functions listed by the respondents. The following *Codes* were used to make the table easy to understand:

- DSF: Decision on school fees
- DSC: Discipline issues
- DRS: Daily running of the school
- FUR: Fundraising
- SM: School maintenance
- MPL: Monitoring performance of learners
- SCD: School Development
- BUD: Budgeting
- CIP: Communication and informing parents
- APS: Appointment of staff
- MPT: Monitoring performance of educators
- POL: Formulating school policy
- PUF: Providing the use of school of facilities
- AGM: Holding annual general meetings
- ADL: Admission of learners
- MSP: Monitoring school performance
- COLT: Ensuring the culture of teaching and learning.

According to Table 2, the findings suggest that the respondents felt that the main functions of SGBs in which parents actively participate were decisions on school fees (22), discipline issues (16), and the daily running of the school (14). This high value confirms the conflicting roles between the SGBs and principals. According to SASA the day-to-day management (running) of the school is the responsibility of the principal, and not of the SGB.

Fundraising, school maintenance, and monitoring of teacher performance had a tally of five each. School development, budgeting, communication with parents, and appointment of staff were each listed by four respondents, whilst formulating school policies, providing the use of school of facilities, holding annual general meetings, ensuring safety and security of learners and educators, admission of learners were listed by three respondents. The next categories, each listed by two respondents, were deciding on admission policies for learners, monitoring school performance, and ensuring that the culture of

teaching and learning exists in schools. The other functions that were listed were code of conduct for learners (1), deciding on school curriculum (1), creating environment conducive to teaching and learning (1), developing a mission statement for the school (1), promoting the best interests of the school (1), ensuring quality education for learners (1), safety and security of learners (1), deciding on school uniform policy (1), offering advice to the school principal (1), ensuring a high degree of transparency and openness (1). Surprisingly, most of these are the functions of SGBs that are stated in SASA. This confirms the lack of understanding of SASA by the parents. However, due to the limitation of space, the broader argument of this article will be limited to decision on school fees and discipline.

Table 2 The actual functions of parents in the school governing body

| Code | Village Green | Hillside | Buchanan | Melbourne | Total |
|------|---------------|----------|----------|-----------|-------|
| DSF | 4 | 7 | 9 | 2 | 22 |
| DSC | | 7 | 7 | 2 | 16 |
| DRS | 3 | 1 | 5 | 5 | 14 |
| FUR | 1 | 1 | 3 | | 5 |
| SM | | 3 | 1 | 1 | 5 |
| MPL | 1 | | | 4 | 5 |
| SCD | 3 | | 1 | | 4 |
| BUD | 1 | 1 | 1 | 1 | 4 |
| CIP | 1 | | 3 | | 4 |
| APS | | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| MPT | 1 | | | 2 | 3 |
| POL | 2 | 1 | | | 3 |
| PUF | | | 3 | | 3 |
| AGM | | | 3 | | 3 |
| SAS | | 1 | | 2 | 3 |
| ADL | | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| WLT | | | 1 | 1 | 2 |
| MSP | | 1 | 1 | | 2 |
| COLT | 1 | | | 1 | 2 |

Governors from the case study schools were asked whether parents play a full role in the SGBs. The findings of the present study found that parent participation varied in different types of schools. It appears that at rural schools parents are often not afforded the opportunity to play a full role in the governance of a school. In most cases decisions are taken by the senior management team (SMT) instead of the SGB. A parent governor explained:

Yes, we do participate, but not to the full extent. At times as parents we are not given the chances of full control as parents of learners of the school and decisions are taken by the SMT while they need to have been taken by the SGB. The SMT takes the role of SGB, the conflict of roles exist[s] between

the school government and the school management (a parent governor from Village Green).

Discipline

The issue of discipline emerged strongly. Governors in most schools agreed that the most difficult decision they had to take concerned the expulsion of learners. The problems in this regard were noted in the majority of schools. For example, in Village Green Secondary School this problem was brought to the fore when the decision was taken by the principal and his senior management team (SMT) instead of the legitimate SGB. A parent governor argued:

The most difficult decision we took was that of expelling a learner who had stabbed another learner. The principal and his SMT were responsible for the expulsion, but at the hearing of the case, which was conducted after the learner had already been expelled, the teaching staff alleged — falsely — that the SGB had recommended the expulsion of this learner. Parents and learners were never involved in that decision, but the SGB had to endorse the decision taken by the principal and his SMT. Parents and learners had certainly not been consulted, so it was a malicious attempt of the teaching staff to implicate SGB members who were not present when an incorrect decision was taken. In addition, neither correct procedures nor proper tribunals had been followed. However, as parents we did not want to be suspected of betraying the principal and the chair, so we had no choice but to pretend that we had been involved the decision. At times, as an SGB member, you can raise issues in an attempt to check whether the Act is being followed, but no one takes you seriously. The majority of members have been fully brainwashed by the principal and educators, so that they believe that whatever the teaching staff and their principal do is always right.

The majority of governors in all the case-study schools felt that they followed procedures in the case of serious offences, but the Provincial Department of Education did not always approve their recommendation to expel a learner. This exacerbates disciplinary problems, since learners are aware that in the end the Provincial Department of Education may reverse the decision of recommendation by the SGB. What did emerge, however, is that three SGBs (Village Green, Buchanan, and Hillside) had contravened the South Africa Schools Act relating to suspension and expulsion.

The Republic of South Africa, in the Government Gazette, of 26 January 2006, suggests in Section 9 of the SASA, as amended, that the governing body of a public school may, after a fair hearing on reasonable grounds and as a precautionary measure, suspend a learner who is suspected of serious misconduct. This is recommended as a correctional measure for a period not longer than one week; or, in consultation with the Head of Department, pending a decision as to whether the learner is to be expelled from the school by the Head of the Department. The latter may only enforce such suspension after the learner has been granted a reasonable opportunity to make representations in relation to such suspension. It is not the function of the SGB to

expel learners. The SGB should only conduct the disciplinary proceedings as contemplated in section 8 of the Act. If a learner is found guilty of serious misconduct during disciplinary proceedings, the governing body may impose the suspension of such a learner for a period not longer than seven school days, or may make a recommendation to the Head of Department to expel such a learner from a public school. However, research suggests that there are positive behavioural outcomes associated with parental involvement, including improved disciplined and increased ability to self-regulate behaviour (Brody, Flor & Gibson, 1999) and higher levels of social skills (McWayne, Hampton, Fantuzo, Cohen & Sekino, 2004).

Finances

It was also suggested by governors that next to disciplinary issues, financial matters were a major concern. The majority of governors grapple with ways of collecting school fees, since in most schools a substantial number of parents qualify for exemption from fees. Schools are left with few effective means of collecting fees from the remaining parents. For example, the Act does not allow school principals to withhold the school reports of learners whose parents have not paid the school fees. At one stage Melbourne did so nevertheless. The chair of governors from Melbourne explained:

The decision we took was on what to do with those parents who do not pay school fees, as this caused dispute among those who paid and those who did not; we also had to decide what to do with those who do not attend meetings, nor respond to the principal's request for private meetings regarding school fees. We suggested that those learners whose parents had not paid the fees do not receive their end-of-year reports. Unfortunately, this contradicts the SASA, which states that learners should not suffer because of the wrongdoings of the parents. Unfortunately, our SGB is now left defenceless.

The chair of governors from Buchanan indicated that financial issues sometimes led to heated participation:

Yes, honestly sometimes parents participate, particularly if there was a controversial issue, and particularly on financial issues. Some could become over-involved.

As I have argued elsewhere (Mncube, 2005; 2007; 2008), this 'over-involvement' is not surprising as financial struggles feature prominently in South African schools. This is particularly true of rural and township schools, where learners have been involved in riots because of the alleged misappropriation of school funds by principals. Owing to the problems experienced by the majority of parents regarding issues of school fees, the Minister of Education has amended the SASA, introducing no-fee schools. This amendment took effect at the beginning of 2007 (Republic of South Africa, 2006).

Power relations

While in the majority of case-study schools not many power struggles were

noted and observed, in Village Green it was noted that participation of parents was hindered by power relations, as in most cases decisions in the SGBs were taken by the senior management team (SMT) instead of the full SGB. A parent governor explained:

Yes, we do participate, but not to the full extent. At times as parents and learners are not afforded an opportunity to take decisions on school matters, but decisions are taken by the SMT while they need to have been taken by the SGB. The SMT takes the role of SGB, the conflict of roles exist between the school government and the school management (Village Green parent governor).

The findings confirm that power relations affect school governance. This is in line with international experience. On the basis of their research, Deem, Brehony & Heath (1995) contend that power relations are central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate. Power relations are 'an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of the SGBs as organization' (Deem *et al.*, 1995:133; Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008).

Power relations also play a significant role in relation to gender issues, which also play a role in shaping parent and learner participation because of traditional gender stereotypes, which still inhibit the performance of women. This was evidenced by the fact that female parent governors tended to be overshadowed by their male counterparts; as in most SGBs female governors tended to be less vocal during the decision-making processes than male governors were. This is associated with the gendered nature of South African society (Mncube, 2008; Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007).

Knowledge of responsibilities and participation

In this article I do not address the election of SGB members, which research suggests currently involves less than 20% of parents of learners nationally. The focus is on the level of participation of those parents who are already serving on SGBs. At Hillside and Buchanan most governors stated that some parents, particularly the black African parents, seem reluctant to meet their obligations. This lack of interest and commitment is corroborated by my research (Mncube, 2005; 2007) and applies to all races. This seems to contradict the view that if parents are aware of their rights and responsibilities, they can legitimately be expected to participate actively in school governance issues. As Table 3 shows, the parents in this study seem to have excellent knowledge of their rights and responsibility. Perhaps the explanation can be found in Table 1, which shows that many parents seem unaware of the functions of the SGBs. These include developing a mission statement for the school; promoting the best interests of the school; deciding on school uniform policy; offering advice to the school principal. Only one governor in each of the case-study schools indicated that these were the main functions in which parents actively take part.

Causes of the lack of participation by black African parents in the former model C schools

It is this lack of participation noted in my research in 2004 (Mncube, 2005) that prompted me to investigate the lack of participation by black African parents in SGBs of the former model C schools and school activities. In response to my question on the causes of the lack of black African parents participating in SGBs of the former model C schools, the majority of governors provided the following answers. It should be noted that some of these causes (educational level and non-attendance of meetings) relate to the other types of schools as can be seen elsewhere in the text.

Educational level

A chairman of a governing body and a teacher, both from Melbourne, contended that parent participation depends on parents' educational level: the better educated a parent is, the more he/she will participate in SGB affairs. The majority of governors at Melbourne expressed the same view.

Parental participation depends entirely on their educational level which plays a major role in their contributions, together with their personal abilities, otherwise, they are passive listeners. New educational changes and challenges make them passive participants (Melbourne chair of governors).

The lack of participation applied to the former model C schools as well, so there was no indication that race was a factor. Van Wyk (1998) suggests that illiterate parents are unable to keep abreast of new challenges in education, and so some parent governors tend to delegate their responsibilities to the school principal, thus becoming passive participants (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2008). A teacher governor from Melbourne noted most parents attend the meetings of their governing body regularly because they are educated and have an interest in education, while illiterates would not have an interest at all. She indicated that in their former SGB most parents had been illiterate, did not attend, and had no interest in the SGB. As a result, the SGB became dysfunctional. Depending on the topic or discussion at hand, interviews, observations or documents some parents can contribute effectively; for instance, as Table 1 suggests, in matters of finance and discipline.

Even though participation was perceived as democratic in Buchanan, black parents seemed reluctant to participate in SGBs. This appeared to be related to the following factors:

Lack of education on parental involvement

A parent governor from Buchanan indicated that 13 years after the country had become a democratic state, the former model C schools are still run in the same way as they had been run before the country became a democratic state when staffing and management were dominated by white educators:

Some do, like for myself I have fought to get things changed, I have been an active participant all the time. Some parents definitely do not play their role to the best of their ability; because they are not in touch with the school,

and this is due to the lack of capacity building or training on how to get involved on school activities and parental involvement (Parent governor from Buchanan).

Another parent governor said:

Many activities in these schools are new to black parents. No attempt has been made to educate black parents on their expected role or to provide accessible explanations to them on how they could be involved in school activities.

The above quotations indicate that even though parents may be willing to participate, the school is not user-friendly to parents, but instead parents feel excluded intentionally or unintentionally by not being educated on how they should be involved. Both quotes clearly state the absence of capacity building for parents so that they can take part in school activities successfully. The two quotes indicate the realities in which some of the former model C schools operate.

Fear of 'academic victimisation'

The majority of parents indicated during the interviews that they are afraid to challenge the *status quo* of the school because they feared victimisation (failing) of their child or children. They also believe that their lack of active participation could cause applications for future enrolment of their children to be declined by the school. The majority of parents interviewed suggested that they fear active participation of challenging the *status quo* and they end up having to accept things even though they do not agree with decisions taken. The danger is that parent governors could become mere rubber stamps of decisions taken by previously white-dominated SGBs. This is in line with Martin (1999), whose research suggests that a 'good' parent is one who does not ask too many questions and does not involve himself/herself in professional matters of the school (Mncube, 2005; 2008).

Language barrier

The majority of governors interviewed indicated that the use of only the English language in governing body meetings has a negative effect on participation of some members, i.e. those who cannot express themselves fluently in English. It seems that the better educated parents insist on the use of English in SGB or parents' meetings. Surprisingly, some of the less educated parents do too. This becomes a win-lose situation, where those with a high level of English-speaking proficiency are able to express themselves, while the opposite is true for some black or non-English-speaking parents.

Difficulty in attending meetings

The majority of governors suggested that the non-attendance of the SGB meetings was another cause of the lack of parental participation in SGBs. This is because most meetings are held at night, despite the guidelines from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education, which emphasise the undesirability of conducting SGB meetings at night. Lotter, of the KwaZulu-Natal

Department of Education (2003:13), states that despite receiving relevant guidelines, many former white and Indian schools continue to hold elections for governing body members at night. This means that true representation of the community in a governing body is not reflected as many African parents, who have to travel long distances, find evening meetings difficult to attend. A parent from Buchanan mentioned most black parents are full-time employees. When schools hold their meetings during the day, these black parents have to obtain permission to attend the meetings. In most cases their employers refuse to give them time off. In contrast, most white parents in these schools are business owners who do not need to obtain permission to attend meetings.

This is why Buchanan and Hillside struggle to get their full parent component at their SGB meetings. Consequently, parents are not fully represented or informed. This affects their participation. The lack of parent participation in the former model C schools is corroborated by McPherson (2000) and Carrim and Tshoane (2000). Furthermore, this is in line with my research (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008). Nevertheless, the findings of this research suggest that some parents do participate and have actually made some SGBs functional, particularly during discussion of controversial issues such as discipline and finance.

Quantitative data on parents' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities and participation

It was important to determine whether parents' knowledge of their rights and responsibilities influenced their participation in school activities. In order to determine this, the information in Table 3 was obtained from parents by means of a questionnaire.

Since South African schools are now more democratically run, parents have generally become extremely knowledgeable about their legal rights and responsibilities in schools. Parents agreed that parents have the right to ask schools how they are teaching the national curriculum (96%), and also that it is the parents'/guardians' duty to make sure that their children attend schools (96%). In addition, the majority of parents (96%) felt that it is a good thing for parents to be members of the school governing body. These results explain why the majority of parents are now beginning to participate more actively in school activities, showing an increased interest in the education of their children. The knowledge of their responsibilities is also evident in parents' responses, as they suggest that it is the parent's/guardian's responsibility to provide time and space for their children's homework (94%). They also agree that it is the parent's/guardian's responsibility to work closely with the school (93%), and that it is the parent's/guardian's responsibility to help children with school homework (93%), while 91% of the parents are of the opinion that parents/guardians should be more involved in making decisions about school activities. This view is corroborated by Epstein (1992) who argued that learners at all levels do better academic work, have more positive school attitudes and other positive behaviours if they have parents who are

aware, knowledgeable, encouraging and involved. In addition, several studies conducted in different countries show that involving parents in instructional tasks has positive effects on learning (Campbell & Mandel 1990; Coleman, 1998; Rosenholtz, 1989; Sanders & Epstein, 1998).

Table 3 Parents' knowledge about legal rights and responsibilities

| Statement | Agree (%) | Disagree (%) |
|--|-----------|--------------|
| I know the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. | 55 | 45 |
| Parents/guardians should be more involved in decision-making about school activities. | 91 | 9 |
| It is a good thing that parents are members of school governing bodies. | 96 | 4 |
| A few parents in a governing body can speak for all the parents/guardians. | 75 | 25 |
| Parents/guardians are only concerned with the needs of their own children. | 54 | 46 |
| Schools must do what the government tells them; parents/guardians cannot make a difference. | 41 | 59 |
| It is a parent's/guardian's right to have his/her child educated as he/she wishes. | 87 | 13 |
| It is a parent's/guardian's duty to make sure his/her child attends school. | 96 | 4 |
| Parents/guardians have the right to ask schools how they are teaching the national curriculum. | 96 | 4 |
| If parents/guardians are not satisfied with their child's progress, they can complain to the school. | 88 | 12 |
| It is the parent /guardian's responsibility to help his/her child with school homework. | 93 | 7 |
| It is the parent/guardian's responsibility to work closely with the school. | 93 | 7 |
| It is the parent /guardian's responsibility to provide time and space for his/her child's homework. | 94 | 6 |

Eighty-eight percent of parents know that they have the right to complain to the school if they are not satisfied with the progress of their children. This figure suggests that there are parents who are still not aware of this legal right. However, 87% of parents agreed that it is the parent's/guardian's right to have his/her children educated as he/she wishes. It also raises some concern that only 75% of parents agreed that a few parents on the school governing body can speak for all of the parents.

However, only 55% of the parents indicated that they know the South African Schools Act. This implies that parents are uninformed about issues of school governance, which explains their lack of interest in participation in school governing bodies. It may also have implications for the reliability of some of the high percentages in the table; it is difficult to understand why

parents have these perceptions about their rights if they do not know the Act. Parents are not only concerned with the education of their children, but with the education of other children as well. This is evidenced by the fact that only 54% of parents indicated that they were exclusively concerned with the needs of their own children. Only 41% of the parents believed that schools must do what the government tells them to, because parents/guardians cannot make any difference. Although the information points to the fact that parents know their rights, it does not mean that they are actually using their rights, e.g. the right to ask more questions about underperforming educators.

In a nutshell, Buchanan School, a former model C school, could be described as operating more democratically than the other three schools. The SGB at this school is actively engaged in school governance and has a sense of ownership of the school, and the chair of governors, and not the principal and his/her SMT, is in charge of the SGB. McPherson (2000) corroborates the findings of this research. He attributes the success of the former model C schools to the fact that the suburban SGB is better able to obtain sponsorships from the private sector since during SGB elections, parents with managerial expertise are elected, The SGB governs an already well-resourced school, with an already well-developed solid infrastructure and the SGB has the potential of marketing the school effectively, which contributes to its sustainability through continued enrolment levels and paid-up school fees.

Conclusion

While steady and noticeable progress in terms of parental participation was noted in Hillside and Melbourne, these schools lag behind Buchanan. Hillside and Melbourne could be described as more or less on a par in terms of democratisation. The latter seemed to be operating better than the former thanks to the efforts of the chairperson of the governing body, who is a university lecturer. The chairperson of governors at Hillside is an elderly woman with a lower educational level who feels that there is no need to make school practices more democratic on the grounds that the school had functioned successfully in the past, using a less democratic model. Village Green School performed poorest in terms of parental participation in decision-making, e.g. governors were not well-informed about a crucial issue of learner discipline, which resulted in the school acting *ultra vires*, contravening several sections of the SASA.

The findings suggest that although parents are part of school governance, most of them are not fully on board. Even though those parents who are elected to the SGBs participate in decision-making processes, some parents, particularly those in rural schools, are not always given sufficient opportunity to participate in crucial decisions affecting the life of the school. They are implicitly or explicitly excluded. This finding is corroborated by Giddens (1984) who maintains that governance of schools is a political activity, involving education professionals and lay people who have their own views on what school is about and the way in which it should be organised. The majority of black African parents in the former model C schools ascribe reluctance to

participate in SGBs and school activities to a lack of education on involvement in school governance and activities, the language barrier because of the exclusive use of English as a communication medium in SGB meetings, difficulty in attending SGB meetings, their educational/literacy level, fear of 'academic victimisation' of their children by educators and power relations in the SGBs. In addition, they believe that their active participation could lead to rejection of applications to enrol their children in the school. These factors tend to inhibit or silence the voice of parents in school matters. Even in the cases where parents are extremely knowledgeable about their rights, the findings show that parents do not always use their rights, e.g. the right to ask more questions about underperforming educators. The manifestation of power relations is clearly observed here; which, as Deem *et al.* (1995) suggest, is central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007). This is what makes school governance a complex issue and why some functions such as appointment of staff, language policy and decisions about school fees have tended to be problematic (Sayed, 2002; Mncube, 2005).

Finally, as I have contended elsewhere, (Mncube, 2005; Mncube, 2007:89; Mncube, 2008) while representation and debate are theoretically open and fair, structural and behavioural factors still inhibit the extent to which SGBs operate; the authoritarianism of school leadership and governance characteristic of the apartheid era have disappeared, yet issues concerning values, behaviour, attitudes and skills necessary for full democratic participation remain. I recommend that more should be done in educating educators about parental involvement in schools; and also educating and encouraging parents in participating in school activities. Most parents interviewed indicated that they had not received any training in this regard, particularly in sporting activities, which are new to them. To make this possible, ways of encouraging parental involvement in school activities should form part of the curriculum of pre-service educators, and existing educators should be given the necessary in-service training. They would then be in a position to encourage parents to deliberate and engage in dialogue about school activities. In this way there would be a great potential for the voice of parents to be heard and they would feel a sense of belonging and hence engage fruitfully in dialogue and debates pertaining to school governance, where they would feel included in decision-making processes, thus arriving at what Martin and Holt (2002) refer to as the 'joined-up governance' (Mncube, 2007; Mncube, 2008). This research has provided what parents think are their responsibilities in SGBs and the cause of lack of parental participation in school activities. However, their vast knowledge of their rights and responsibilities did not correlate with their participation in school activities.

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