

Educators' Experiences on the Role of Parents in the School Governing Bodies of Rural Schools

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Abstract

The aim of this article is to investigate the experiences of educators on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools. Apart from a literature review on the experiences of educators on the role of parents in the governance of rural schools, the article reports on a study in which empirical investigation based on quantitative research paradigm was used to collect data from educators. The literature findings revealed that the inclusion of parents in the school governing bodies is a critical component of education in South Africa. The study revealed that empirical findings elicited that educators would like parents to have a significant role to play in school governance. The study is concluded by the submission that it is essential for parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools to be given necessary training so that they can have a working knowledge of school governance activities.

Keywords: Educators, experiences, parents, rural schools, school governing bodies.

Introduction

The inclusion of parents in the school governing body is translated into the democratisation of education as stipulated in the South African Schools Act (Act No 84 of 1996), which stipulates that parents must participate in school governance (RSA, 1996). This participation involves among other things planning, organising, leading, supervising, policy-making, decision-making, controlling, and coordinating, which are some of the management duties of the school governance structures. Consequently, the aim of the article is to probe the views held by educators on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools, problems encountered by educators when attempting to involve these parents in school governance and the suggestions that educators have on encouraging the effective involvement of these parents in school governance. Quan- Baffour (2006) states that every child is born to a home and the first education to a child is received from home, therefore school education is supposed to be built by the home.

It becomes difficult to dispute the benefits that parent involvement can have for children's school experiences, yet parents in school governing bodies and educators often hold one another at arm's length, unsure of the role that each should play. Decker, Gregg and Decker (1994) in Duma (2009) observed that that educators and parents in the school governing bodies often have uncertainties about the roles that the each should play in the governance of schools. Some educators love to have parents in the school governing bodies intricately involved in the governance of their schools, while others feel that too much parental involvement in the governance of schools violates their sense of professionalism. Van Schalkwyk (1998) in Duma (2009) warns that some educators have a negative attitude towards parents in the school governing bodies. Educators with such an attitude, tend to blame parents for meddling in the school governance operations.

The reasoning of these educators is often in line with Edwards and Redfern's (1988) assertion in Squelch and Lemmer (1994) that ever since Plato, there has been, a strong belief that education should be carried out far from the interference of parents and that there was no challenge to the view that teaching should be carried out behind closed doors. Swap (1993) in Mncube (2007) reinforces this notion by submitting that some educators regard themselves as superior to parent governors. They are reluctant to work with school governing bodies and are negative towards them as they regard them as intrusive and troublesome. Badenhorst (1992) in Mkentane (2003), contends that if educators ignore the strengths that the father and mother figures can bring to schools, valuable resources that could have a positive impact on the school governance activities are neglected. The question that arises is how educators perceive the role of parents in school governing bodies of rural schools. For this purpose, in the first section of this study, the introduction is presented and the background to the study is provided which deals with the genesis and the context of parent involvement in school governance in South Africa. Sections 2 and 3 present the motivation, problem statement and research objectives. In sections 4 and 5, research methodology, data analysis and results are presented. Finally, in section 6, the implications of the findings are outlined.

Background to the study

A cross-section of the field of education management reveals that very little research has been conducted on the experiences of educators on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools. The relative unavailability of literature on this research problem is itself an indication that research has to be done in order to provide more insight and improved approaches on this issue. This study focuses on the experiences of educators on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools and also involving them in school governance activities, which means including them in school decisions. Success in the execution of school governance duties by these parents is determined by the extent to which parents in the school governing bodies have received good capacity building and empowerment skills in school governance.

The genesis and context of parent involvement in school governance in South Africa

This section looks at the history of parent involvement in school governance in South Africa. During the apartheid era, parent involvement in school governance was arranged according to race distinctions. Rose and Tunmer (1975) in Duma (2008) state that the idea of including parents in the statutory bodies of the school governance stemmed from the findings of the Levy Commission of 1892, which recommended the establishment of a district board consisting of the magistrates, missionaries, colonists and two native parents, appointed every two years to run education at district level. However, the proposed board ended up excluding the native parents as the final report of the Commission stated, in matters pertaining to education; the aborigines were not supposed to have opinions that are worthy of notice (Duma, 2008).

According to Seroto (2004), many commissions were appointed to deal with parent participation in schools. These commissions recommended the establishment of school committees and school boards so that Black parents could share, as far as possible, in the life and control of the schools in which their children were enrolled. Seroto (2004) contends that although the school committees were established to involve black parents in educational matters, in real terms the White officials had the last say in all matters affecting the school governance structures of Black schools. The duties and functions of the school committees were restricted as they were not even consulted and represented when educational policies, which affected their children, were formulated. Many groups resisted these school committees. For instance, the African National Congress (ANC) organised a school boycott in 1955 and planned to withdraw children from schools.

The 1981 De Lange Commission recommended that autonomy be given to schools so that parents would have a major share in decision-making processes (Seroto, 2004). The Report, however, did not gain the support of the black youth, nor would it dissolve their anger, as it was seen as a modification of apartheid education, not its eradication. Seroto (2004) asseverates that by the end of 1985, Black schooling was in a crisis. The Soweto Civic Association called a meeting of all the stakeholders in Black schools. They formed the Soweto Parents' Crisis Committee, which in 1986 formed the National Education Crisis Committee (NECC) that introduced the concept of People's Education as an alternative education for Black children. Parent committees arrogated power, with the NECC as the umbrella body. The 1988 Education Laws Amendment Act allowed for the establishment of school committees, comprising the farm owners and parents (Graaff & Gordon, 1992). It is worth noting that little use was made of this Act, because the Right Wing members of Parliament were against it.

These authors maintain that the Conservative Party Members of Parliament opposed the election of black parents onto school committees and that the then Minister of Education acceded to their objections, stating that farm owners would be able to maintain control if they so desired, without appointing a school committee. That meant that a school committee was at issue only if the owner of the farm decided not to manage the school himself (Nasson, 2004). After 1994, fundamental changes became evident within the education system in South Africa. The education policy development since then shifted to cater for the involvement of parents in school governance. The 1996 South African Schools Act (Act No 84 of 1996) was passed to establish school governing bodies that included parents in the governance of schools (RSA, 1996).

Motivation of the study

The process of involving parents in the governance of rural schools is difficult to manage because of the high rate of illiteracy among the parent governors (Mashile, 2000). Despite the opportunities brought by the South African Schools Act and the need for improvement in the governance of schools, the parental involvement in school governing bodies in rural schools today, still need serious improvement. The researcher, having worked in the rural schools as a teacher and a principal and currently, as a lecturer visiting rural schools to lend support to the university student-teachers, perceives that parents in school governing bodies have difficult experiences in the governance of schools and the support from educators is not evident. One of the major tasks of the parents in school governing bodies is to bring about and develop partnership between schools and parents based on trust and respect among all the stakeholders in the governance of schools. Educators, however, express dissatisfaction with the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools. They cite the high rate of illiteracy among parents in the school governing bodies; hence school governing bodies have a difficult path to tread in terms of dealing with matters of school governance.

Problem statement

The problem which is of major concern in this study:

- What are the experiences of educators on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools?

In dealing with this problem posed in the above question, it is necessary to sub-divide the problem into the following:

- The educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools
- The educators' analysis of the role of parents in the school governing bodies of their schools.
- Problems encountered by educators in engaging these parents in the governance of their schools.

Research objectives

The objectives of the study are the following:

- To investigate the educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools.
- To analyse the role of parents in the school governing bodies of their schools.
- To identify problems encountered by educators in engaging these parents in the governance of their schools.
- To present findings and recommendations emanating from the study.

Research methodology

In order to collect sufficient data to answer postulated research questions, both literature study and empirical investigation based on quantitative research design were undertaken.

Literature Review The researcher consulted literature which is relevant to the topic. This was done to provide a critical synthesis of what has already been written on the topic.

Quantitative Research Paradigm

A survey to gather questionnaire-based data in a real-life setting was used in the study. The research design included the delimitation of the field of survey, the selection of respondents (size of the sample and sampling procedures), the research instruments, namely the questionnaires, a pilot study, the administration of the questionnaires, and the processing of data.

Population and Sampling

The researcher used the simple random sampling method to select twenty educators of rural schools in each circuit of Sisonke and UMgungundlovu Districts as respondents. Since these two districts have ten circuits, two hundred educators were selected as respondents. This method was favoured for its simplicity, unbiased nature, and its closeness to fulfilling the major assumption of probability, namely that each element in the population stands an equal chance of being selected (McMillan and Schumacher, 2006 & Kumar, 2010).

Format of the questionnaire

The questionnaire was divided into four sections, with each section focusing on the aims of the study. Section 1 dealt with the biographic and general information. Section 2 had closed questions focusing on the educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses as follows: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree* and *Strongly Disagree*. Section 3 also had closed questions, focusing on the educators' analysis of the role of parents in the school governing bodies of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes*, *Unsure* and *No*. Section 4 consisted of open-ended questions, wherein educators had to mention problems they encounter when attempting to engage these parents in school governance and had to suggest what could be done to improve the role of parents in school governing bodies of rural schools.

Administration of the questionnaires

The researcher conducted a pilot study in five rural schools. These schools were part of the general population from which the sample was drawn, but not part of the sample itself. No inherent weaknesses were discovered in the questionnaires and the data solicited confirmed the questionnaires' validity and reliability; consequently there was no need to modify the questionnaires. In the main study, two hundred educators were randomly selected and were requested to complete their questionnaires and post them back to the researcher.

The first sample population responses were 152 (76%) respondents. After the follow-ups, 22 respondents returned the completed questionnaires to make total responses of 174 (87 %) respondents. That represented a satisfying response.

Data processing

After all the questionnaires had been received, the important task was then to reduce the mass of data obtained to a format suitable for analysis. The respondents' responses were coded and frequency distributions were generated.

Results and discussions

General and biographical profile of the respondents

When the item of educators' qualifications was analysed, it was realised that all the respondents had fully completed the information regarding general and biographical data.

Table 1 Educational background of educators

In table 1, a total population of 174 (n=174) responded. Table 1 revealed that a high proportion of educators (65%) had good academic qualifications. This shows that the education level of the teacher population in rural schools is improving. Teacher qualification improvement is the competence of tertiary institutions who offer in-service programmes for unqualified and under qualified educators. This high qualification rate can help educators to empower school governing bodies with capacity building skills in school governance.

Educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools

In this section, educators were required to indicate their experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools.

Table 2 Educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools

This table focused on the educators' experiences on the role of parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Strongly Agree*, *Agree*, *Disagree*, and *Strongly Disagree*.

- Parents in the school governing bodies have a significant role to play in the governance of rural schools

In Table 2, there was congruence among the respondents that parents in the school governing bodies have a significant role to play in the governance of rural schools. Monadjem (2003) notes that many countries have legislations that ensure that parents' involvement in school governance. These legislations are based on the realisation that parents have a right to play an active role in their children's education, and that parents in school governing bodies may help alleviate some of the problems faced by students.

This positive support for the parents in school governing bodies in the governance of schools indicates that the respondents understand the fact that parents are integral to schooling. As Macbeth(1989)in Mncube (2007) observed that parents are first-line clients of the school. The respondents, furthermore, appreciated the fact that the demand for democracy and participation in the South African education system has a long history, stretching from colonial times in the 17th century to the intense and bitter student protests in the eighties (Nongqauza, 2004). The involvement of school governing bodies in the governance of schools is essential in running a successful school as they are empowered to participate in decision-making processes.

- Parents in the school governing bodies have a responsibility to support the school management structures

Again, Table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that they agreed that parents in school governing bodies have a responsibility to support the school management structures. Section 20 (1) of the South African Schools Act clearly states that it is the duty of the school governing body to support the principal, teachers and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions (RSA 1996, 13). Nongqauza (2004) confirms that parents should be drawn into school activities not only in terms of auxiliary tasks, but also in the school management functions of planning, financing, administration and control of the school's property.

- Schools fare better when they draw on the parents in the school governing bodies' expertise and assistance

The majority of the respondents (90%), as indicated in Table 2, agreed that schools fare better when they draw on the parents in school governing body's expertise and assistance. This impressive support for this item indicates that educators value the involvement of parents in the governance of their schools. Wikelund (1990) in Duma (2010) also confirms this, when she asseverates that every research study on parent involvement in education has shown that parent involvement increases student achievement. She further on insists that research indicates that programmes designed with strong parent involvement produce students who perform better than otherwise identical programmes that do not involve them at all.

- Parents in the school governing bodies need to ensure that students attend school

As seen from Table 2, a high proportion of the respondents (90%) indicated that parents in school governing bodies have to ensure that students attend school. The support that educators attach to this item indicates that parents in school governing bodies, as representatives of parents need to urge students to attend school. The South African Schools Act stipulates that every parent must ensure that every student for whom he or she is responsible for attends a school from the first school day of the year in which such student reaches the age of seven years until the last school day of the year in which such student reaches the age of fifteen years or the ninth grade, whichever occurs first (RSA, 1996). In this instance, the parent is legally bound to enforce student attendance in school.

- Parents in school governing bodies can be effective in instilling discipline among students

Again, table 2 revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (80%) indicated that parents in school governing bodies could be effective in instilling discipline among students. This response indicates that educators believe that parents, as primary teachers, have a responsibility to mould their children to perfection, on the other hand, the response may imply that since the banning of corporal punishment in schools, the schools find themselves powerless to instil discipline, as Section 10 of the South African Schools Act stipulates that no person may administer corporal punishment at a school to a student and any person who contravenes this section is guilty of an offence and liable for conviction which could be imposed for assault (RSA, 1996). Potgieter, Mosoge, and Mothaba (1997) advance that good school discipline is an important feature of effective schools. Discipline is therefore, one of the most important management functions of the school. To achieve good discipline, every school must have a code of conduct, which must be adopted by the school governing body. According to Potgieter et al. (1997), the adopted code of conduct must consist of the school rules that are necessary to make the school environment orderly and safe.

It is within this context that educators consider school discipline problems as the responsibility of school governing bodies.

- Parents in school governing bodies to maintain the school facilities.

In conclusion, table 2 revealed that all the respondents agreed that parents in school governing bodies should maintain the school facilities. This unanimous agreement of educators is in line with the stipulations of the South African Schools Act which demand the school governing body to administer and control the school's property, buildings, and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels (Rossouw and Oosthuizen, 2005). Arguments have been advanced that this area of involvement better fits school governing bodies, as some educators argue that school governing bodies have little to offer in matters of curriculum and pedagogy. Ainley (1995) in Duma (2009) accentuates that school governing bodies' involvement in decision making processes does not necessarily mean that they are actually making decisions, as their involvement has little impact, for instance, on the curriculum, and may be only tokenism.

Educators' analysis of the role of parents in the school governing bodies in the governance of their schools

In this section, educators were required to analyse the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of their schools.

Table 3 Educators' analysis of the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of their schools

This table focused on the educators' analysis of the role of school governing bodies in the governance of their schools. The respondents were asked to rate their responses according to the following scale: *Yes, Unsure and No*.

- Parents in the school governing bodies interact with educators regularly

Table 3 revealed that a majority of the respondents (80%) indicated that parents in school governing bodies do not regularly interact with educators. This implies that most schools do not really use school governing bodies to promote democratic participation. The majority of schools are still authoritarian and reinforce passive subordination amongst school governing bodies. The policy maintains that school governing bodies are an important instrument for school governance.

- Parents in the school governing bodies interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on

Table 3 further on revealed that a high proportion of respondents (87%) indicated that parents in school governing bodies interfere in issues that they do not have any knowledge on. School governing bodies play a pivotal role in democratising the education landscape as they are the structures that represent the voice of the parents. They provide space for parents to articulate their needs, concerns, aspirations as well as present their wishes to the schools. The school governing bodies provide parents with an opportunity to participate in school governance and to participate in appropriate decision making. School governing bodies, therefore, need to know and understand their rights, responsibilities and obligations in school governance and should contribute to the sound management of the school activities.

- Parents in the school governing bodies cause some educators to feel that they lose control over their work

It seems that educators in this survey were concerned that parents in school governing bodies cause them to feel that they lose control over their work. As it can be seen from Table 3, a majority of the respondents (60%) indicated that parents in school governing bodies cause some of them to feel that they lose control over their work. This is not surprising because most of the schools surveyed were before 1994, under the Apartheid Education Departments, which considered the idea of parents being involved in school governance as an absurdity of the first order. They held the belief that decisions about education lay squarely in the domain of educators, farm owners and school inspectors. So, involving parents will tantamount to above mentioned stakeholders losing their status and influence in schools.

- Parents in the school governing bodies help educators to organise cultural and sporting events

Table 3, in conclusion revealed that a high proportion of the respondents (70%) indicated that in their schools parents in school governing bodies do not help educators to organise cultural and sporting events. The policy stipulates that school governing bodies should aim to promote sport and cultural activities within the school community.

Problems encountered by educators in engaging parents in school governing bodies in the governance of their schools

This section was an open-ended question, where educators were required to mention the problems they encounter when trying to engage parents in school governing bodies in the governance of their schools. In analysing the responses, the problems were ranked in the order of frequency as follows:

- Many parents in school governing bodies do not have a great deal of education: they are either illiterate or semi-literate (76%).
- Parents in the school governing bodies have no expertise in school governance: they depend on educators (67%).
- Parents in the school governing bodies irregularly attend school governance meetings (47%).
- Parents in the school governing bodies do not participate adequately in meetings (41%).
- Parents in the school governing bodies have negative attitudes towards educators (32%).
- Parents in the school governing bodies have their own agenda (20%).

Educators' suggestions on improving the role of school governing bodies in the governance of schools

In another open-ended question, educators were required to make suggestions on what can be done to improve the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of schools. In analysing the responses, the suggestions were ranked in the order of frequency as follows:

- All parents in the school governing bodies should be literate (80%)
- The Department of Education to introduce literacy classes for parents in school governing bodies (74%)
- Training workshops should be organised for parents in school governing bodies (66%)
- School governance should be redesigned to form new patterns of collaboration and empowerment of educators and parents (62%)

Summary of the findings

This summary of the findings is not exhaustive, but only deals with salient issues that emerged from the study, as discussed below.

Educators' experiences on the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of rural schools

The empirical survey revealed that a high proportion of educators perceived parents in school governing bodies as having a significant role to play in the governance of schools. This positive support for parents in school governing bodies indicates that parents are integral to schooling. Parent involvement in school governance is essential in running a successful school. This recognition is also based on the realisation that parents have a right to play an active role in their children's education, and that school governing bodies may help alleviate some of the problems faced by students.

The study also found out that parents in school governing bodies have the responsibility to support the school management structures as well as the responsibility to teachers and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions. This is also confirmed by Nongqauza (2004), as he states that parents must actively participate in school activities not only in terms of auxiliary tasks, but also in the school management functions of planning, decision making, controlling and financing.

This study also confirmed that schools fare better when they draw on parents in school governing bodies' expertise and assistance. This is also collaborated by Wikelund (1990); who emphasises that parent involvement in school governance improves the parents understanding of school governance and enables them to share knowledge of school governance matters with professionals.

Educators' analysis of the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of their schools

The study furthermore revealed that, although there is a consistent agreement among the educators that parents in school governing bodies have a significant role to play in school governance, nevertheless, they do not regularly interact with educators. This implies that these schools do not really use school governing bodies to promote democratic participation. The policy maintains that school governing bodies are an important instrument for school governance. In conclusion, the study confirmed that school governing bodies cause some educators to feel that they lose control over their work.

Problems encountered by educators in engaging school governing bodies in the governance of schools

The study furthermore highlighted the problems encountered by educators when trying to engage parents in school governing bodies in governance of schools such as the high rate of illiteracy among parent school governing body members and their irregular attendance of school governance meetings.

Educators' suggestions on improving the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of schools

In conclusion, the study outlined the educators' suggestions on ways of improving the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of schools, which included, among others, the following: parents in school governing bodies to be literate, the Department of Education to introduce literacy classes and the initiation of training workshops for parents in school governing bodies.

Conclusion

This study explored the views held by educators on the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of rural schools. Although the participants were supportive of the role of parents in school governing bodies in the governance of schools, their experiences also illuminate challenges associated with implementing school governance activities. One of the great challenges is the illiteracy rate of parents in school governing bodies, who should be playing a significant role in school governance activities. However, they lack the knowledge and the training to do so. It is essential for them to be given the necessary training, which should include the opportunity to acquire the necessary knowledge so they would be in a position to participate meaningfully in the school governance activities.

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Table 1 Educational background of educators

Education Qualification	N	%
Below Matric (Grade 12)	0	0
Matric (Grade 12)	0	0
Matric + 1 (M+1)	22	13
Matric + 2 (M+2)	38	22
Matric +3 and above	114	65
TOTAL	174	100

Table 2 Educators ‘experiences on the role parents in the school governing bodies of rural schools

Items	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree	Total
Parents in the school governing bodies have a significant role to play in the governance of rural schools	N 70 % 40	86 50	18 10	0 0	174 100
Parents in school governing bodies have a responsibility to support the school management structures	N 148 % 85	8 5	18 10	0 0	174 100
Schools fare better when they draw on parents in school governing bodies’ expertise and assistance	N 122 % 70	34 20	18 10	0 0	174 100
Parents in school governing bodies need to ensure that students attend school	N 130 % 75	26 15	18 10	0 0	174 100
Parents in the school governing bodies can be effective in instilling discipline among students	N 74 % 42	66 38	26 15	8 5	174 100
Parents in school governing bodies to maintain the school facilities	N 140 % 80	34 20	0 0	0 0	174 100

Table 3 Educators ' analysis of the role parents in the school governing bodies in the governance of their schools

Items	Yes	Unsure	No	Total
Parents in the school governing bodies have a significant role to play in the governance of rural schools	N 34 % 20	0 0	140 80	174 100
Parents in school governing bodies have a responsibility to support the school management structures	N 152 % 87	0 0	22 13	174 100
Schools fare better when they draw on parents in school governing bodies’ expertise and assistance	N 104 % 60	18 10	52 30	174 100
Parents in school governing bodies need to ensure that students attend school	N 52 % 30	0 0	132 70	174 100