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Effective school governing bodies: parental involvement

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This article investigates how parents can best be involved in school governing bodies (SGBs). The study adopts a qualitative approach, using focus group interviews. The findings suggest that the context within which schools operate plays a major role in the effective functioning of SGBs. The latter are perceived to be fraught with corruption – usurping powers bestowed upon them – as well as with difficult power relations leading to exclusion of some parents. The study provides recommendations of how best parents can be involved in SGBs for the effective functioning of the school.

Doeltreffende skoolbeheerliggame: ouerbetrokkenheid

Hierdie artikel ondersoek die beste vorm van ouerbetrokkenheid by skoolbeheerliggame (SBLe). Die studie maak gebruik van 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsmetode met behulp van fokusgroeponderhoude. Die bevindinge dui daarop dat die konteks waarin skole funksioneer 'n belangrike rol speel in die doeltreffende funksionering van SBLe. SBLe word dikwels beskou as deurtrek van korrupsie – misbruikers van die bevoegdhede wat aan hulle verleen word. Voorts is SBLe vol ingewikkelde magsverhoudinge wat tot die uitsluiting van sommige ouers lei. Die studie beveel die beste manier aan vir ouers om by SBLe betrokke te raak vir die doeltreffende funksionering van die skool.

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This article addresses the views of members of school governing bodies (SGBs) in terms of how best SGBs should operate in order to address issues of democracy and social justice. The introduction and background to the study are followed by a conceptual exploration of democratic school governance as it relates to both school effectiveness and social justice.

A great deal of national and international literature has supported the need for greater democracy in education (*cf* Harber & Davies 1997, UNDP 1993, 1994 & 1995, UNICEF 1995). Irrespective of the many different definitions of democracy (Davies 2002), in this instance democracy consists of five basic principles: representation, in terms of which individuals are represented on issues affecting their lives or that of their children; participation, in terms of the involvement of individuals in the decision-making process; rights, comprising a set of entitlements which are protected and common to all individuals; equity, pertaining to the fair and equal treatment of individuals and groups, and informed choice, with tools being provided for decision-making based on the provision of relevant information and the application of sound reasoning (*cf* Davies *et al* 2002, Mncube & Harber 2010).

There are two main sets, of arguments and evidence, suggesting that democratic schools are also more effective schools. There is, for example, evidence suggesting that listening to parents, encouraging their participation, and giving them more power and responsibility (greater democratisation) can enhance school effectiveness and facilitate school improvement. The effective school culture includes many of the core values associated with democracy, such as tolerating and respecting others, participating and expressing views, sharing and disseminating knowledge, valuing equity and equality, and the opportunity for students to make judgments and choices. An empirical study of the practice of pupil democracy in Denmark, Holland, Sweden and Germany (Davies & Kirkpatrick 2000: 82) concluded that:

> It seemed to everyone clear that when pupils had a voice and were accorded value, the school was a happier place; where pupils are happy and given dignity, they attend more and they

> work more productively […] There was far more evidence of pupils taking responsibility for their own learning […] The link between legislation (for democracy in schools) and pupil achievement is an indirect but powerful one.

In their major study of schools in Britain, Rutter *et al* (1979) found that schools that give a large proportion of students responsibility had better examination results, better behaviour and attendance, and less delinquency. Trafford, in his detailed study in one British school in the mid-1990s, and Hannam, in his study in the early 2000s of twelve schools which could manifestly demonstrate a claim to describe themselves as "student participative", found that there was a significant effect on both A level and GCSE examination grades, in Hannam's case a judgment also supported by OFSTED (*cf* Trafford 2003: 15).

In terms of developing countries, Harber (1993) found in interviews with Tanzanian teachers and pupils that they were of the opinion that greater pupil participation in decision-making improved communication in the school, reduced discipline problems, and increased the learners' confidence and discussion skills. Lwehabura (1993) also studied four schools in Tanzania that all faced financial problems, resource shortages and low teacher morale. He found that, both in the ability to deal with practical problems of stringency and in terms of examination success, the more democratically organised the school, the more effective (or perhaps less ineffective) it was.

The second set of arguments and evidence concerns the issue of the ultimate goals of education. If education aims to create democratic citizens and a democratic society, it must be organised to do so in order to operate effectively and achieve effective (democratic) outcomes. Does experience of more democratic forms lead to people with more democratic skills, values and attitudes? While there is substantial literature on the theory, problems and practice of democratic education in respect of developing countries, empirical research on the impact of more democratic forms of education is not common, but it does exist. Some research findings from the USA and Britain suggest that more democratic schools can

contribute to both participatory skills and the values of operating democratically (Hepburn 1984). In terms of teaching methods, there is evidence that more open, democratic classrooms, which make greater use of discussion and other participatory methods, can foster a range of democratic political orientations, such as greater political interest, greater political knowledge, and a greater sense of political efficacy (Ehman 1980). It has been shown that democratic and cooperative teaching methods reduce interethnic conflict and promote cross-cultural friendship (Lynch 1992).

It is interesting to note for present purposes that literature on school effectiveness suggests not only that more democratically organised schools are more effective schools but also that an important element in both democratic participation and school effectiveness is an enhanced role for parents (Harber 1998).

1. Democratic school governance in South Africa

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA), emanated from the White Paper on the organisation, governance and funding of schools (RSA 1996). SASA, which became operative at the beginning of 1997, mandated that all public state schools in South Africa must have democratically elected SGBs comprising teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and, in the case of secondary schools, learners. While SGBs in South Africa were only legislated in 1996 and first implemented in 1997 (Mncube 2007), they were already in existence in England and Wales as early as in the 1980s (Farrell & Law 1999: 5). Their primary function was the overall administration of schools on behalf of the local education authorities, with the assumption that SGBs would be better able to manage and more accountable than the latter could be (Farrell & Law 1999: 5). The 1980 Education Act, which made it compulsory for all schools in England and Wales to have an SGB for just such a purpose, set the requirement regarding parental and teacher representation (Farrell & Law 1999: 5). The legislation in question was partly driven by a desire to promote

local accountability in schools and to enhance school effectiveness (Beckett *et al* 1991: 9, Thomlison 1993: 12).

Similar bodies to English and Welsh school governors exist as mechanisms for school accountability in other countries such as Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, New Zealand, Portugal, Spain, parts of the USA, and South Africa. However, SGBs take on considerably diverse forms, although they are generally underpinned by notions of democracy and school effectiveness. Power is typically devolved to school-level governing bodies, whereas operational management remains the responsibility of the principal (Bush & Gamage 2001: 39).

In South African SGBs, parents are required by law to form the majority on SGBs, with the chair of the SGB being a parent (Mncube 2007: 136-7). This was an attempt to give power and voice to parents in order to advance issues of democracy and social justice in a country that was fraught with racism, oppression and authoritarianism. In terms of learners being included in the SGBs, the SASA mandates that secondary-school learners who are members of the representative council for learners (RCL) should form part of the school governance authority by way of their participation in SGBs. SASA clearly states the functions of the SGBs which include, among others, determining both the language policy of the school and school fees, and recommending the appointment of educators and non-educator staff. The appointment of staff should consider factors like the principle of equity, the need to redress past injustices, and the need for representivity (RSA 1996: section 20). The implications of such requirements are that members of SGBs, including parents and learners, should be well informed about issues of school governance and of the legal requirements stipulated in SASA. The intention of such legislation is that issues of democracy and social justice should be taken into consideration and that this is also a way of enhancing school effectiveness.

SASA is regarded as a tool which is aimed at, *inter alia*, redressing past exclusions and facilitating the necessary transformation to support the ideals of representation and participation

in the schools and the country as a whole (SASA 1996). By its enactment of SASA, the South African government's aim was to foster democratic school governance, thereby intro-ducing a school governance structure involving all the stakeholder groups of education in active and responsible roles, in order to promote issues relating to democracy, including tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (DoE 1997).

Several authors' opinions differ on the functioning of SGBs in South Africa. For example, Bush & Heystek (2003: 127) argue that, despite the significant problems facing the educational system in South Africa, SGBs provide a good prospect of enhancing local democracy and of improving the quality of education for all learners. In addition, the Ministerial Review Committee (2004: 82) regards the SGBs as a unifying factor at schools, despite many researchers having rejected such a view (Karlsen 1999, Sayed & Soudien 2005: 115-24). It has been found that conflict among SGB members is central to the experience of school governance. The many tensions that exist in SGBs can partly be blamed on such bodies being predominantly middle-class in identity, with class-related norms regarding parental participation prevailing (Brown & Duku 2008: 432-4). SGBs tend to assume that parents have the resources, including the time, to spend on school activities (Mncube 2005: 271-8, Sayed & Soudien 2005: 115). Brown & Duku (2008) contend that SGBs are fraught with social tension, and an ethos of rejection, domination, and psychological stress. Such an ethos leads to the isolation of those parents who have low socio-economic status, compromising their participation in school governance. Research also suggests that issues relating to socio-economic status often stifle parental participation in SGBs (Deem *et al* 1995: 133-42, Ministerial Review Committee 2004). This view is corroborated by Mncube (2005: 271-8) who highlights a number of factors leading to the lack of parental participation on SGBs, namely unequal power relations; socio-economic status; different cultural expectations of diverse communities; lack of confidence and expertise caused by the absence or lack of training; poor sharing of information; the rural-urban divide; language

barriers; poor organisation, and a high turnover rate of governors (Mncube 2005: 271-8).

Although numerous studies have been conducted on the functioning of SGBs in South Africa (*cf* Brown & Duku 2008: 432, Bush & Heystek 2003: 127, Heystek 2004: 308), few studies (Mncube 2007: 136 & 2008: 29) have examined the role played by SGBs in addressing issues of school effectiveness and the manner in which parents who are members of SGBs can best be utilised. The present study attempts to fill this gap.

2. The role of parents in democratic education and school effectiveness

The following section on parental involvement in school activities draws mainly on Mncube (2010: 234-5) According to several researchers in the field[1], listening to parents, encouraging their participation, and giving them more power and responsibility (in other words, greater democratisation) improve the functioning of schools.

Lemmer & Van Wyk (2004: 183) classify different types of parental participation, namely parenting; communication; volunteering; home learning, and decision-making. Educators who work with parents understand their learners better; are able to generate unique, rather than routine, solutions to classroom problems, and can reach a shared understanding with the parents and learners (Epstein 1987: 214). Parents who are involved in school activities tend to develop a greater appreciation of their role in the schooling of their children (McBride 1991: 73-85). Parental involvement in education has also been associated with a variety of positive academic outcomes, including higher grade point averages (Gutman & Midgley 2000).

Epstein's model of parental involvement suggests that home-school communication should be a two-way communication, reflecting a co-equal partnership between families and schools.

1 *Cf* Apple & Bean 1999: 1-13, Davies & Kirkpatrick 2000: 82, Davies *et al* 2002: 4-9, Harber 2004, Moggach 2006: 17.

Lemmer & Van Wyk (2004: 183-4) corroborate such a view. However, Grolnick *et al* (1997: 538) and others question the feasibility of home-school partnerships by arguing that the adoption of the policy of home-school communication is not beneficial for learners of lower socio-economic status (SES), and that the involvement of parents does not reduce the gap in the achievement of learners of different SES (Grolnick *et al* 1997: 538, Feuerstein 2000: 29). Epstein (1991: 261) also raises questions concerning the presumed positive relationship between involve-ment and achievement, concluding that, while certain gains might be reflected in terms of some achievement tests, such does not hold true for mathematics tests. The gains might occur only in subjects in which the parents feel confident about their own ability to support their children's learning (Epstein 1991: 261).

Cave (1970: 46) states that schools cannot assume the sole responsibility for education, as parents must assume part of such responsibility themselves. The role of parents is integral to their children's schooling. They are involved both directly and indirectly with their children's schooling in many different ways. In the majority of cases, such parental involvement has many benefits, both for the school and for the learners involved. Accordingly, Epstein (1991: 270) maintains that children perform better at all levels, have more positive attitudes towards school, and expect more from school if their parents are concerned, enthusiastic and involved in their schooling. It is, therefore, not surprising that partnerships between parents and educators have become enshrined in educational policy, and that parents are increasingly encouraged not only to benefit from the education of their children, but also to become active partners in the production of educated children (Crozier 2005).

Starkey & Klein (2000: 223) also link the improved performance of learners to programmes and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home. Some commentators argue that such improvement does not mean that those children whose parents are not involved in their schooling will not achieve. Neither does it mean that such parents will

observe an automatic increase in their children's achievement. In addition, evidence shows that parental involvement improves the learners' emotional well-being and levels of school attendance, while also encouraging a better understanding of the roles and relationships involved in the parent-learner-school triad (Epstein *et al* 2002: 3). In addition, research suggests that those parents who participate in decision-making experience greater feelings of ownership and are more committed to supporting the school's mission (Jackson & Davis 2000). The more intensively parents are involved in their children's learning, the greater the achievement attained (Cotton & Wikeland 1989). There is a paucity of information on how parents decide to become involved or not in their children's education. This article attempts to address the achievement gap by investigating parental involvement in school activities, their satisfaction with the school, and their knowledge about their legal rights and responsibilities.

Martin (1999: 49) notes that the 1944 British Education Act gave parents in Britian the right to have a say in choosing which secondary school their children should attend, though having such a choice does not guarantee that the parents' voices are heard by the educational authorities involved. She argues that "parental voice rather than parental choice is the proper policy imperative in the interest of social justice". In the past, the majority of parents in South Africa were limited in their choice of the schools to which they could send their children, due to apartheid legislation. They also had little say in school activities, because they lacked representation in such schools (Mncube 2007: 129). The involvement of parents in school activities can be hampered by a school's expectations of them. For example, Martin (1999: 50) found that "the good parent was the one who supported the culture of the school, attended when required but did not interfere with professional practice". Such an expectation implies that if a parent involves him-/herself in the professional matters of the school, s/he is not regarded as a good parent. In other words, educators regard the professional running of a school as their responsibility. Such an expectation is in line with the requirements set out in

terms of SASA which clearly distinguishes between the roles of school governors, including those parents who form part of the school governing body (SGB), and those of school management. Section 16 of SASA clearly differentiates between the role of the principal (school management) and that of a member of an SGB. Section 16 states that the governance of a school is the responsibility of the SGB, while the responsibility of the principal rests with the professional management of the school. The very thin line that exists between the governance and management of a school leads to tension between the principal and governors concerned (Heystek 2004: 308). Therefore, the onus should be on the relevant stakeholders to ensure that there is greater harmony between the two parties concerned. The absence of such harmony might, effectively, shut out the parents' voices and exclude them from meaningful participation in school activities.

Democratic theory and theories of social justice cannot be divorced from one another, in particular as far as issues relating to participation and representation are concerned. Drawing on the work of Griffiths (2003: 7-16), social justice refers to issues of social class, gender, race, discrimination, exclusions, non-recognition, and equality, including issues of sexuality. In a nut-shell, according to Griffiths (2003: 16), social justice refers to both the individual's personal circumstances and experience and the systematic instructional effects of different political and social positions relating to gender, race and class, among other factors. Relevant to this article is the relational aspect of social justice which is concerned with procedural rights and with ordering social relations according to formal and informal rules that govern the way in which members of society treat each other at both micro and macro levels. This dimension of social justice is holistic and non-atomistic, since it is concerned with the nature of the interconnections between individuals in a society, rather than with the individuals themselves (Martin 1999: 49-50, Mncube 2005: 276).

In terms of issues of social justice, discussions of recognition are common (Gerwitz & Maguire 2001: 7-18, Griffiths 2003:

7). Fraser (1995: 68) argues that the relational aspect of social justice is cultural or symbolic, and rooted in social patterns of representation, interpretation and communication. Representation is the focus of the current article, and relates to whether and how parents are represented and employed in SGBs to promote both effectiveness in the functioning of SGBs and democracy in South African schools. One should consider whether those parents who are represented are respected and recognised for their valuable contribution, and whether their cultures are also respected and valued, or whether they tend to become absorbed by the dominant culture of the organisation which they serve. This article thus investigates whether or not the operation of SGBs honours issues of democracy and social justice. Fraser (1995) and Christensen & Rizal (1996) suggest that the granting of due recognition to all cultural groupings should help to solve the problem of cultural injustice, allowing for the input of all others to be truly valued.

Young (2000) expresses similar views relating to internal and external exclusion. In this respect, she contends that democratic norms mandate inclusion as a criterion of political legitimacy. She states that democracy implies that all members of an organisation are included equally in the decision-making process, so that any decisions that are made should be considered by all as legitimate. She mentions two types of inclusion, namely external exclusion, in terms of which some individuals are kept out of the debates or decision-making processes, and internal exclusion which refers to the exclusion of those who are normally included in the group in the form of dismissing their interaction privileges, language issues and/or participation as irrelevant (Young 2000). The exclusion of certain individuals highlights the fact that representation on an SGB *per se* does not always guarantee that an individual will be able to participate effectively in it. The institution concerned can therefore be considered responsible for ensuring that all participants are given sufficient space and time to enable them to participate actively in deliberations and decision-making. This article focuses on the effectiveness of parental involvement in

SGBs and how this does or does not contribute to the democratic functioning of schools and the levels of social justice present.

Fraser (1995) contends that the problem of cultural injustice cannot be resolved by socio-economic redistribution, holding that cultural oppression can be appropriately addressed by means of granting proper recognition to and valorising the oppressed group.

The above discussion of the need for greater democracy in schools, in respect of social justice, provides the conceptual framework for the qualitative inquiry described in this article. The inquiry explores whether exclusiveness is present to any substantive degree in the governance of South African secondary schools, by addressing the extent to which, as well as how well, parents are being employed in SGBs in South Africa to promote issues of democracy and social justice. The intention of the researchers is to encourage the effective functioning of parents in SGBs.

2.1 Problem statement

The study addresses the following questions. Have school governing bodies been able to contribute to the effective functioning of the school? Is the involvement of parents on school governing bodies successful or not? Were parents sufficiently trained to serve on school governing bodies? Do school governing bodies contribute to addressing issues of democracy and social justice in South African schools? In what manner should parents be involved in school governing bodies in order to render their effective functioning?

3. Research design and methodology

The current qualitative study explores the perceptions and experiences of stakeholders in a school in terms of whether the relevant SGB promotes the effective functioning of the school; how best parents on an SGB can be employed to further the effective functioning of such bodies, and how such an SGB can best address issues relating to democracy and social justice. The study also explores issues relating to the training of school governors.

The qualitative data in the current study was generated by means of the use of focus group interviews. Such interviews are a form of group interview that capitalises on the communication between research participants in order to generate data, with the researcher relying on in-group interactions and discussions for the generation of rich data. The rationale for the researchers' use of focus group interviews was congruent with the contention that the use of this method can facilitate access to people's knowledge and experiences, and can be used to examine not only what people think, but also how and why they think in a certain way. The researchers ensured that the number of participants in the groups surveyed fell within the standard range of focus groups, comprising between four to eight research participants.

3.1 Sample selection

The use of a small sample is common in qualitative research, in which the aim is depth rather than breadth (Lemmer & Van Wyk 2004: 184). Four secondary schools were selected from the Western Cape and four from KwaZulu-Natal. A total of eight schools were involved. The schools were purposively selected to provide a range of rural, township and urban schools in each province, so that views could be obtained from those who had a role to play in schools that varied markedly in terms of their physical condition, facilities, available space, access to social amenities, as well as local community infrastructure and poverty levels. However, this study does not intend to compare the two provinces, but to garner the views on how best parents can be involved in SGBs. Therefore, there was no need to scrutinise the views per type of the school.

The sample was mainly chosen on convenience and included the principal and three focus groups drawn from each school. The sample consisted of two parents and two educators who had to be currently serving on the SGB. Initially, the researchers planned to interview the full component of the school governing body of each school, but during the first interview they found that this did not succeed, in particular due to power relations – the majority

of parents found the presence of the principal and educators threatening – in rural areas, in particular. Due to issues of power relations parents were not able to confide during the interview. As such, in the ensuing interviews, the researchers interviewed three categories of governors separately – principal, educators, and parents – and the sample included only those who are members of the SGBs.

Approval for the research to be carried out in the relevant schools was obtained from the two provincial Departments of Education. The informed consent of the various participants was sought, to whom the normal guarantees regarding privacy and the right of withdrawal from the study were given.

3.2 Data analysis

The data consisted of transcripts and notes taken during interviews conducted with the participants. Marshall & Rossman (1999: 154) claim that, although data analysis may be relatively unstructured, ambiguous, and time-consuming process, it may also be creative and fascinating.

Transcripts were transcribed and analysed according to Giorgi *et al*'s (1975: 83) phenomenological steps. First, each transcript was read to gain an overall sense of the whole. Secondly, the transcript was read to identify what transactions could have occurred during the interview, with each transition consisting of a separate unit of meaning, in order to access the deeper meaning of the responses received. Thirdly, any redundancies found in the units of meaning were eliminated, and the remaining units were interconnected. Fourthly, the participants' language was converted into the language of science. Fifthly, the insights gained from conducting the study were synthesised into a description of the overall experience of leadership practices (*cf* Mncube & Harber 2010: 616). Finally, the analysed data were categorised into themes that emerged from the findings.

4. Research findings and discussion

As the use of the participants' voice in research is always very powerful, selections from the transcripts of interviews were used to ensure that their voices are heard (*cf* Mncube & Harber 2010: 616). The responses represent the views of how best parents can be employed on SGBs to address issues of democracy, social justice and the improved functioning and effectiveness of schools.

This section presents the themes that emerged from the data analysis: SGBs and the effective functioning of schools; the promotion of the effective functioning of parents on SGBs; the provision of training for effective parental involvement on SGBs; the role played by SGBs in the promotion of democracy and social justice, and the power relations that are at play in SGBs.

4.1 School governing bodies and the effective functioning of schools

Participants were asked whether SGBs had contributed to the effective functioning of schools. The general opinion of the participants from the three schools in KwaZulu-Natal was that SGBs had made a positive contribution to schools, despite the problems and challenges that had negatively affected the ability of some members of SGBs to make a meaningful contribution to their school.

However, a Western Cape-based principal suggested that the involvement of parents in SGBs had not resulted in the effective functioning of schools, but had instead exacerbated the position in schools. He answered the question as follows:

> SGBs would not work effectively, because most of the parents are not educated, and they don't understand anything about education. Instead, schools are manipulating those parents. I would say in a way, in our black schools, there isn't much that those SGB members have actually done to improve the situation in our schools. Instead they've made schools even worse […]

> SGBs have not improved the school […] the main thing that I have seen SGBs doing in our schools is doing appointments of staff, which, most of the time, has been coupled, and flawed

> with many disputes. There are many cases in my area, especially where I teach, where teachers were actually buying from the SGB members – giving money. If I want to be a principal, the SGB members will decide whether this vote is going to be R5 000 or so, so, as a potential candidate, I have to pay up front R5 000, and then I know for sure I will be in the job. Everybody will be called for interviews, but you will know for a fact that so and so is actually earmarked for this post, because he has paid some money to a certain member of the SGB. So you can see that it never achieved the purpose for which it was intended [which is democracy] (Western Cape semi-urban school principal).

The level of education is one of several factors that hamper the operation of SGBs. The lack of providing education to the nation is another way in which issues of distributive aspect of social justice manifest themselves. This low level of education and socio-economic status ultimately leads to the exploitation of the uneducated personnel-parents. Due to their status these parents tend to be excluded and marginalised – which is another form of social injustice. The impact of educational level was also a major finding in Mncube's research:

> 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 (Mncube 2009: 95).

Grolnick *et al* (1997: 538) also question the feasibility of home-school partnerships by arguing that the adoption of the policy of home-school communication is not beneficial for learners of lower socio-economic status (SES). In the researchers' opinion the same holds for parents who tend to be exploited because of their educational level. This thus compromises issues of social justice and democracy.

Another respondent commented on the role which SGBs play in the effective functioning of schools. He posits that the functioning of an SGB depends on the quality of the parents who are involved:

> You can still have parents that are illiterate, but [it] should be your responsibility of the school to empower these parents

> – these parents are serving the school for three years without any pay, so the best that the school can give back to these parents is to empower them, so that at the end of three years they are much better than what they were before they joined the school, and they could be ready to take up any other leadership positions in the community because of the learning they've got from the school (KZN SGB 1 educator).

Empowering parents in active participation in school activities leads to effective functioning of the school since, as Epstein (1991: 261) argues, children perform better at all levels, have more positive attitudes towards school, and expect more from school if their parents are concerned, enthusiastic and involved in their schooling.

The context within which a school operates plays a major role in the effective functioning of SGBs. The majority of the participants interviewed were of the opinion that, in the former Model C schools, the functioning of the SGBs led to the effective functioning of the school, but that the opposite was happening in other schools. It appears that the SGBs did not improve but rather exacerbated the situation in the latter schools, with many SGBs in such schools having had their powers usurped by the teaching staff, in particular the principal. Former Model C schools are former well-resourced whites-only schools which, during the apartheid era in South Africa, were the first schools to accept black learners. Such schools were expected to be self-managing, with input from the parents of the children attending the school by means of school committees, which had most of the say in terms of how the schools were managed. The school fees were higher at such schools than at other, less well-resourced schools.

4.2 Power relations and social exclusions in school governing bodies

Power relations and personal agendas can negatively influence the operation of SGBs. A principal from an SGB in the Western Cape stated:

> In our case, there was no effective governance, simply because of the fact that there was issues of personality clashes and, once you have that kind of dilemma between governance and

> management, then there is always going to be a non-appreciation of the other one's task [...] especially when both sectors seem to be comprised of powerful persons in terms of the views. So, for me, it is very important to note that, from the onset, it is very important to have a clear distinction between governance and management (Western Cape SGB 2).

The above comments are corroborated by several authors (*cf* Karlsen 1999, Sayed & Soudien 2005: 115-6), who argue that conflicts and dilemmas exist in SGBs. In addition, Brown & Duku (2008: 432) contend that SGBs are fraught with social tension, rejection, domination, and psychological stress, leading to the isolation of those parents with low socio-economic status. In addition, Deem *et al* (1995: 133) contend that power relations are the key to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate. Deem *et al* (1995: 133) state that power relations are "an ineradicable feature of the fragile character of the school governing bodies as organizations".

The operation of governing bodies in this study was also characterised by abuse of power, puppet status, exploitation and manipulation, and conflicting roles. Their operation was thus characterised by social injustice and undemocratic tendencies.

In addition, some SGBs exercise internal exclusions, not fully involving even those parents who are also members of the body. For example, a KwaZulu-Natal-based principal contended:

> In many instances, principals will chair. The SGB chairperson [who comes from parent component] is only there for issues of formality; otherwise, the principal will act as the one who is running the SGB. Members should be actively involved through the establishment of the subcommittees of the SGBs. Where some of them get an opportunity to chair the meetings of these subcommittees, they feel involved (Educator from KZN rural school).

The above is not a good example of parental involvement in schools, in which parents are increasingly encouraged not only to benefit from the education of their children, but also to become active partners in the production of educated children (Crozier

et al 2005). But it is a good example of parental exclusion in matters affecting the education of their children. Young (2000: 52-3) mentions two types of exclusions, namely external exclusion – where some individuals are kept out of the *fora* for debates or decision-making processes – and internal exclusion – where individuals are normally included in the group but are still excluded, for example, by the interaction privileges, language issues, and participation of others dismissed as irrelevant (Mncube 2007: 137).

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" (Deem *et al* 1995: 133). This is what makes school governance a complex issue.

The findings of the current study suggest that, like in any other school activities, as theory suggests, involving parents on SGBs can be beneficial to the school. For example, the participants noted that some members of SGBs have skills that could be of benefit to the school, and that parent members can assist with establishing and strengthening the links between the schools and the communities they serve. The above view is corroborated by Starkey & Klein (2000: 223) who link the improved performance of learners to programmes and interventions that engage families in supporting their children's learning at home. In the same vein, parental involvement improves the learners' emotional well-being and levels of school attendance, while encouraging a better understanding of the roles and relationships involved in the parent-learner-school triad (Epstein *et al* 2002: 10-12).

In addition, parents can assist with teaching and learning activities by becoming involved in the selection of staff, thus ensuring that the school has good teachers. They can also help to improve the infrastructure of the school, by promoting the construction and maintenance of buildings. They can also participate in staff induction; assist with excursions, school functions and general planning; help to solve problems, such as

those of teacher or learner absenteeism; assist with motivating and mobilising the parent body, and help to promote the image of the school. In a nutshell, the SGB is a forum, in which all stakeholders of the school should participate, creating a sense of shared ownership of the school. Despite such ideas being mooted, research findings indicate that some parents do not participate as much as they could in SGBs.

The argument advanced by Mncube (2007: 136) also suffices in this instance in that, if SGBs have to function effectively, ample space should be created for parents to participate sufficiently in SGBs so that they engage fruitfully on deliberations dealing with school governance. Such space would allow the parents' voices to be heard; parents would feel a sense of belonging and a sense of recognition, and they would engage fruitfully in dialogue as they feel included in debates. By allowing the parents' voice to be heard there is a great potential for parents to be part of school governance issues. This would lead to the nature of cooperation advocated by Martin (1999), which she termed "joined-up governance"; silencing the voice of parents implicitly or explicitly would imply that social justice and democracy are not honoured in SGBs.

The following section addresses participants' views on their responses on how best parents can be involved in SGBs. The following response was given in respect of the issue of parents and payment and regulatory mechanisms:

> I feel they should be given incentives, which will be a motivation for them to be part of [the] SGB and schools could end up attracting people from the rural areas in becoming members of the SGB (Educator from KZN rural SGB).

Such incentives could take the form of payment and the establishment of regulatory mechanisms to discipline lazy or uncooperative members, though it would be difficult to discipline voluntary SGB membership. The majority of the participants seemed to support the idea of paying parents for the work they do on the SGB.

Issues of the valorisation, appreciation and recognition of parents for their contribution to SGBs were also raised:

> … but most of all, I think those people in the governing bodies need to be valued and appreciated. For example, in our school, when we do the end-of- year function, we do it jointly for the staff and the SGB, in order to appreciate their contribution to the school (Western Cape SGB 1 educator).

The above view is corroborated by Fraser (1995: 68) and Christensen & Rizal (1996: 24), who suggest that awarding due recognition of those parents who serve on an SGB might help to correct matters of cultural injustice, allowing for the recognition and valuing of all input. Recognition and appreciation are social justice issues which are in hot contention (Gerwitz 1998: 469, Griffiths 2003: 8-16).

The most skilled parents may be co-opted onto the SGB to provide skills that are lacking in the operation of a SGB. Although co-option is not a common practice in most black African schools, it is widely practised in the former Model C schools, and this is in line with SASA stipulations, with one respondent stating:

> There is a clause in the South African Schools Act that stipulates that the SGB can co-opt 5 members onto the governing body for specific reasons, and I think that allows the space to look at the gaps in our SGBs and co-opt people who can actually help to empower the SGBs, but for some reasons I know many of our black schools do not use this option (Western Cape SGB 1 principal).

This statement confirms that whether the context of the school is rural or urban matters in terms of how the SGBs operate. In addition, the governors suggested that some skilled members of the community should be co-opted onto the SGB and, even if they do not have children at the school concerned, they should be elected as full members of the body. They should be provided with sufficient training to be effective school governors.

4.3 Training for effective parental involvement on school governing bodies

The training of parents was another key point that was mooted during the interviews. This section will consider such training as a way of improving effective parental involvement with SGBs. The participants were asked whether parents were sufficiently well trained to become part of an SGB and, if so, how relevant was the training for them in order to function efficiently in such a body. Various participants suggested several different opinions in this regard. In general, it was found that parents had been trained to some extent, but insufficiently, and much more was required to be done.

On joining the SGB, the parents concerned were provided with once-off training, which was relatively unhelpful. Parents should rather be provided with such training on an ongoing basis. They should also be encouraged to attend as many workshops as possible, on such issues as financial management, shortlisting, and education laws, among others. This would enable them to develop skills which they could use when their term of office expires. Another respondent from an SGB in KwaZulu-Natal argued:

> The training that parents get from the Department is a once-off. Once parents are elected on the SGBs, they are given the once-off training and they never get any ongoing training; we need to develop our parents on an ongoing basis, because they need to know what is in it for them also (KZN SGB 2 parent 2).

In addition, participants were of the opinion that the awarding of section 21 status to certain schools has affected the effective functioning of schools and their SGB. There are two types of public schools in South Africa: section 20 and section 21. The state considers section 20 schools incapable of managing their own funds, so that their funds are managed by the state. Such schools have to requisition any supplies from the state, which entails their submission of completed claim forms to the regional office, which then acquires such supplies on behalf of the school concerned. With regard to the no-fee schools, the schools receive some of the funding even if they are still section 20 schools.

Hence they must be able to manage the additional funds. Even if it is still only a paper budget, they must still be able to manage it; to make decisions; to determine priorities according to their mission statements, and to decide how much and what to purchase. However, section 21 schools are considered to have the capacity to manage their own funds, which are kept in the school's bank account. They supply their own needs with such funds, and do not have to rely on the region to purchase what they require on their behalf. Such schools normally have effective SGBs, financial policies and a fully functioning finance committee. The participants in the current study suggested that all school governors receive training in how a school can attain section 21 status, so that all section 20 schools can strive to gain such status. The general view is that, once all schools achieve the desired status, the functioning of the SGB and the general running of the school should be substantially improved.

Another commonly expressed view was that the general public needs to be informed about, and trained in, the functions and role of SGBs. Such learning and training could be done via the public media, by means of coverage in newspapers and on national television. At school level, the general view was that, before the election of SGB members, the entire parent body should be trained by way of the media, so that by the time the parents are elected to the body, they should already know what is expected of them as members of the SGB.

The evidence from England and other countries is that training is essential if SGBs are to achieve the objectives set for them. The Department of Education (DoE 1997) contends that capacity-building is a major requirement for South African SGBs. In addition, Ngidi (2004: 260-3) maintains that providing training programmes for the members of SGBs could play an important role in the operation of such bodies, by improving their awareness regarding curriculum-related activities. In addition, there is a need for training the participants in SGBs in order to enable such bodies to function efficiently. Training might help to circumvent the problem caused by the conflict of roles between school

governors and school management teams to which several authors allude (Heystek 2004: 308, Mncube 2005: 271-8).

4.4 Promotion of democracy by school governing bodies

In South Africa an effective school provides an experience of democracy and social justice as made clear by government education policy. As such it was necessary to gauge some perceptions regarding democracy and social justice. The participants were asked whether SGBs contribute to developing democracy in South African schools. The general opinion was that they do, but not to the fullest extent possible, due to the lack of training or induction into the role which SGB members need to play, causing such bodies not to function effectively. The issue of SGBs in promoting democracy is well captured in the following statement by one of the participating principals:

> SGBs are by its [their] own right democratic institutions – there is representation of all stakeholders – parents, learners, teaching and non-teaching staff [...] all the stakeholders have a voice in terms of governance of the school (Western Cape SGB 2 parent).

Examples were given of how the SGB contributes to the democratic functioning of schools.

4.4.1 Race

> When appointing staff our school governing body ensures that all races are represented in the school. For example in our school there is a white teacher coloured teachers, African teachers, Zimbabwean and South African black teachers (Cape Town township school 1 principal).

4.4.2 Gender

> Gender balance has not been an issue in the school – there have been more males than females [...] appointments are not only done for the sake of gender balance while quality is ignored [...] we look into the gender balance without compromising quality appointment ... (Cape Town township school 2 educator).

The SGB is a democratically elected body, and represents various stakeholders in a school, which creates a space for them

to air their views, irrespective of their differences, thus helping to ensure freedom of expression.

All stakeholders are encouraged to participate in such a process. When SGBs are formed, the law states that no discrimination should take place on the grounds of race, sex, creed or religion. SGBs are obliged to be fair and open in the awarding of contracts in terms of the tendering process. Another reason why the involvement of parents in SGBs makes a positive contribution to the maintenance of a democratic environment is that such involvement fosters communication with the wider parent body, allowing for the sharing of ideas regarding the improvement of teaching and learning. In addition, parents can be employed to raise funds which are required to meet the school's needs, such as the need for improved security.

5. Conclusion

This article explored SGBs as far as issues of democracy and social justice are concerned. The investigation considered the following issues: whether the implementation of SGBs led to the effective functioning of schools; whether SGBs contributed to the development of democracy in South African schools; whether they contributed to addressing issues of social justice in South African schools; whether the involvement of parents and learners on SGBs is working in schools, and whether parents and learners are sufficiently trained to form an effective part of SGBs. It was found that the context within which a school operates plays a major role in the effective functioning of SGBs. The general opinion of the KwaZulu-Natal SGBs was that such bodies have made a positive contribution to the development of effective schooling, despite some problems and challenges, such as the illiteracy of some parents, which have limited the ability of some members of SGBs to make a meaningful contribution in the running of their schools. The general view of the majority of the SGBs from both the Western Cape and KwaZulu-Natal provinces was that, in the former Model C schools, the functioning of the SGBs led to the effective functioning of the

school, whereas the opposite case was true in the black schools. But the researchers did not provide evidence that the democratic process or social justice played a role in the to a large extent efficient SGB. The author did not provide any substantial evidence that the effective functioning of the SGB can contribute to democratic process or is it issues such as knowledge, skills and experience? The latter may be linked to social justice issues but the author failed to indicate this in the article.

The situation in Western Cape schools was found to be markedly different from that prevailing in the KwaZulu-Natal schools, with the participants from SGBs in that province expressing a belief that the involvement of parents in such a body had not resulted in the effective functioning of the school but had rather exacerbated the situation in schools, due to SGBs being fraught with corruption-usurping powers. There was not sufficient evidence to support this conclusion. This may be because the author did not indicate from which schools the quotes originated. There were different quotes even from the Western Cape to indicate that there are well-functioning SGBs. The author did not link this supposedly difference in functioning to either democratic or social justice issues as a result or caused by democracy or social justice. Hence it lacks focus and evidence. Such a finding was in line with those explored in the current author's earlier study (Mncube 2005: 271-8). In addition, SGBs were found to be fraught with contests for power between some parent governors and school management teams. Such a finding is in line with that of Brown & Duku (2008: 432), who contend that SGBs are fraught with social tension, rejection, domination, and psychological stress, leading to the isolation of those parents who have low socio-economic status. Coupled with such contests for power, it was found that the school principals concerned socially excluded some chairs of SGBs.This finding was corroborated by Young (2000: 52) in her discussion of external and internal exclusion.

The participants in the present research proposed ways in which parents could be encouraged to participate more fully

on SGBs, including the payment of those parents who are SGB members, and the establishment of regulatory mechanisms to discipline lazy or uncooperative members. In addition, the participants believe that the following would contribute to the effective functioning of the SGBs: the valorisation, recognition and appreciation of those parents who are school governors; the co-option of parents with relevant skills; the election of parents with relevant skills, even if such parents do not have children attending the school, and the effective training of members of the SGBs. They also affirmed their belief that, once parents are members of the SGBs, they should receive ongoing training on issues pertaining to the functioning of the SGBs. The findings suggest that the involvement of the media (in particular the newspapers and national television) can play a pivotal role in the training of members of the SGB. The participants held that the general public needs to be informed about, and trained in, the functions of the SGBs, even before general elections are held for such bodies in schools.

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