

# Parental partnerships in the governance of schools in the Black townships of Port Elizabeth

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*This article focuses on the functionality of school-governing bodies (SGBs) as the voice of parents in the governance of schools. After nearly sixteen years since the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) came into effect, the question that still raises many concerns among stakeholders in education is whether Black parents through their SGBs are aptly fulfilling their roles as rightful partners in the governance of their children's schools. The aim of this study was therefore to determine whether Section 18 of SASA was being appropriately realised in the Black townships of Port Elizabeth. Using the qualitative research method, a sample of ten schools – five primary and five secondary schools – was intentionally selected from the Black townships of Port Elizabeth. A total of forty in-depth open-ended interviews were conducted. The study found that, although the schools had legally constituted SGBs, these SGBs were not functional. The findings of this study shed light on the challenges why a partnership cannot materialise if Black parents do not have the capacity to be partners in the governance of schools. Hence, this study provides new insight into the status quo of Black parental involvement in the governance of schools.*

**Keywords:** school-governing body (SGB), Black parents, parental partnerships in education.

## Background to the problem

After nearly sixteen years since the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (SASA) came into effect, the question that still evokes many concerns is whether Black parents as members of school-governing bodies (SGBs) are currently fulfilling their expected roles as partners with schools in the education of their children. SGBs are expected to play a leading role in establishing effective schools that guarantee learners equal and quality educational opportunities (Joubert, De Waal & Rossouw, 2004; Probyn, Murray, Botha, Botya, Brooks & Westphal, 2002). In this study a Black person refers to a person who is dark-skinned and of African origin. Black schools are those schools that were historically serviced by the former Department of Education and Training (DET) as opposed to former Model A, B and C schools. In this article, parental partnerships in schools denote the interaction between teachers and other school personnel through officially elected SGB members.

In earlier studies on the subject of the role of SGBs, it was found that SGBs did not realise the goals clearly set out in SASA (Singh, Mbokodi & Msila, 2004; Mabasa & Themane, 2002). Ntshingila (2006) states that one in three South Africans over the age of twenty has no schooling at all or has not completed primary school. Cooter (2006:698) adds that intergenerational illiteracy is a sociocultural phenomenon whereby illiterate parents sponsor home conditions that may seriously hinder their children's cognitive development, thus perpetuating a cycle of illiteracy.

In their research on Black parental involvement in education, Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004) report that without effective Black proactive involvement, historically disadvantaged schools in South Africa are less likely to succeed in their efforts to improve education. Now seven years later, the question once again surfaces as to whether the lack of Black parental involvement in education is attributable to lower expectations and consequently poor results in Black township schools. The problem investigated in this study was whether the planned partnerships between Black parents as members of SGBs and the

schools are taking place as envisaged in SASA. Hence, the functionality of Black parents as members of SGBs is the prime issue in this article.

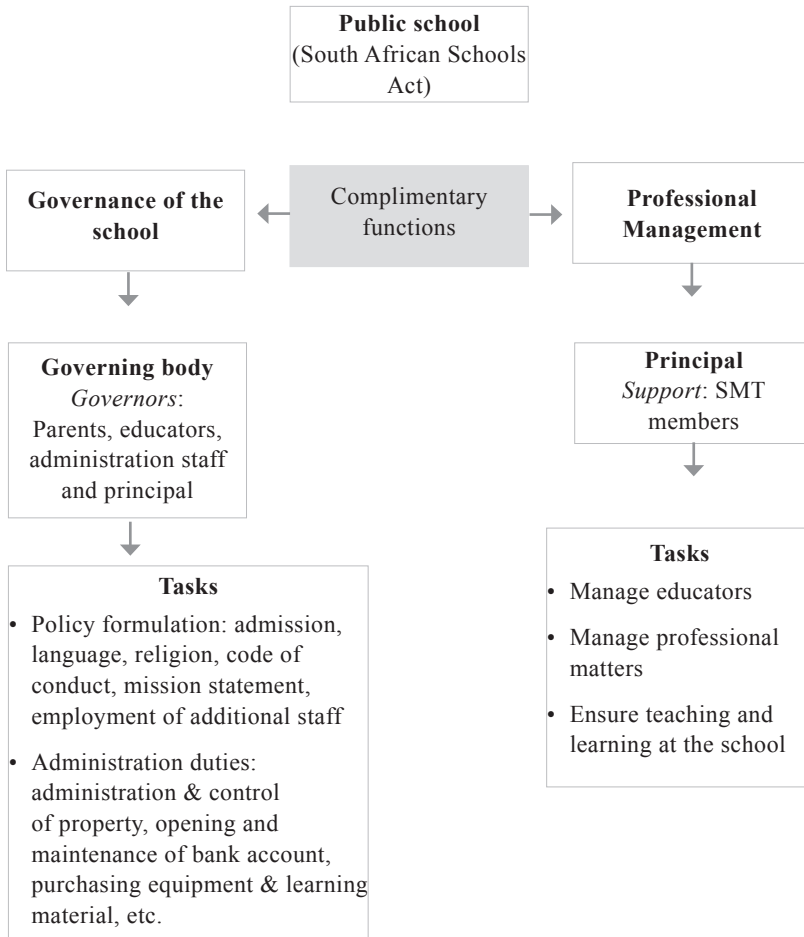
## **Theoretical framework**

This article is written against the background of Section 24(1)(a) of SASA which requires parents to be partners in the governance of schools (Mabasa & Themane, 2002). This partnership should happen through a legally constituted SGB. Section 18 of SASA clearly stipulates that parents are the official partners in the governance of their children's school.

According to Singh, Mbokodi and Msila (2004), Black parents, especially those from impoverished backgrounds, need to be empowered if they are to make a significant contribution to their children's education. A partnership between parents and schools is an instrument to improve and develop the schools as parents involve themselves in the schools' activities in order to benefit their children's education (Hoover-Dempsey, Battiato, Walker, Reed, De Jong & Jones, 2001; Calitz, Fuglestad & Lillejord, 2002; Vatterott, 2009; Petesch, 2007). This relationship creates the opportunity for parents and teachers to become involved in a more formal and structured partnership relating to the education of the child. The importance of this partnership is emphasised by Vatterott (2009:55), who avers that the "power relationship between schools and parents must be realigned to embrace parents as equal partners in their child's education".

In their study on adolescent violence in urban secondary schools, Bender and Emslie (2010:55) argue that much research still needs to be done with the focus on learner development and effective family-school partnerships. The latter study also clearly illustrates the need for a stronger parent-school partnership. The envisaged partnership between parents and the school lies in the management of organisational systems, physical and financial resources, human resource management, the management of teaching and learning including extra-curricular activities, and the management of policy, planning, school development and governance.

As aptly pointed out by Baeder (2010:57), teachers' lives are increasingly disconnected from those of their learners. Many teachers commute to school from distant suburbs or live in different neighbourhoods from those in which they teach. Bridging the gap is especially important to foster the partnership between the school and the community it serves (Molepo, 2000). SASA provides for this partnership through the SGBs in whom the governance of schools is vested. Figure 1 illustrates how this relationship is structured and the complementary nature of its functions.



**Figure 1: Parental partnerships in school governance**

The parent component constitutes 60% of the SGB whose chairperson should be a parent. Research has consistently shown that with the increase in parent partnerships in the governance of schools, there is a concomitant increase in student achievement (Ramirez, 2001:130). Gonzalez (2002:132) cites numerous studies that identified the existence of relationships between parental partnerships and such student variables as academic achievement, sense of well-being, school attendance, attitude, homework readiness, grades, and educational aspirations. While these studies may not be linked directly to schools in South Africa, the findings are universally significant in terms of parent-school relationships. Blankstein (2004:167) and Cotton (2001:4) believe that nothing motivates a child more than when learning is valued by schools and communities working together in partnership. They note that parent partnerships lead to greater achievement irrespective of factors such as socio-economic status, background, educational level and whether or not parents are employed. Edwards and Alldred (2000:3) state that across the political spectrum, parental partnerships are regarded as enhancing the educational performance of children from deprived socio-economic backgrounds. In addition, such partnerships serve as a market mechanism or even a communication approach to improve the schools' effectiveness for all learners.

Gonzalez (2002:132) observes that the lack of parental partnerships in schools leads to excessive peer influence on learners. This inevitably creates negative educational outcomes which range from truancy to drug abuse and from depression to low grades. Poor attendance and disciplinary problems resulting

in violence are also negative outcomes when parents do not participate as partners in governing their children's schools (Bender & Emslie, 2010; IRIN, 2008). Heystek (in Calitz et al., 2002:112) believes that a partnership between parents and schools is an instrument to improve and develop the schools because parents through their SGBs involve themselves in the schools' activities as they firmly believe that this involvement will benefit their children's education.

Cotton (2001:4) and Hornby (2000:1-2) add that parent partnerships have positive effects on student attitudes and social behaviour, and more positive parental attitudes towards teachers and schools. Van Deventer and Kruger (2003:260) point out that community input into the school curriculum (e.g. language policy) could also help to ensure that learners develop desirable attitudes.

The researchers (of this article) therefore identified the following criteria as important indicators of parental partnerships in the governance of schools:

- the existence of a functional legally constituted SGB;
- attendance at school meetings by parents as part of the SGB protocol;
- financial support for schools by parents as members of SGBs, and
- the role of parents as SGB members regarding home-school communication.

The above conceptual framework was employed to investigate the functionality of parents as members of SGBs in the Black townships of Port Elizabeth.

## **Aim and objectives of this study**

The aim of this study was to determine whether Section 18 of SASA was being appropriately realised in the Black townships of Port Elizabeth. In order to achieve this aim, the objectives of the study were to:

- ascertain whether SGBs are functional in Black townships in Port Elizabeth;
- determine whether Black parents in Port Elizabeth have the capacity to serve as effective partners in the governance of schools, and
- determine the mitigating factors that militate against Black parents in fulfilling their roles as required in terms of Section 18 of SASA.

In the light of the above aim and objectives, it is hoped that this study will provide new insight into the current *status quo* of Black parental involvement in school governance.

## **Research design and method**

### **Qualitative research method**

The qualitative research method was chosen as the most suitable method of data collection for this investigation. Locke, Spirduso and Silverman (1993:99) and Hammersley (2000:2) concur that a qualitative research method is a systematic, empirical strategy for answering questions about people in a bounded social context where the focus of attention is on the perceptions and experiences of participants. In this study, the point of departure is the dictates of SASA, which expects parents to be partners in the governance of schools. People in a bounded social context whose perceptions were investigated were the principals, teachers, learners and chairpersons of the SGBs:

- learners: how they perceived the extent of involvement (or non-involvement) of their parents in school activities;
- principals and teachers: how they perceived the involvement (or non-involvement) of parents in school activities, and

- the SGB chairpersons (representing the parents): how they perceived their involvement and the involvement of the entire parent body in the activities of the schools.

The advantage of using qualitative research methods is to permit the researchers to study selected issues in depth without being constrained by predetermined categories. This contributes to openness and detail that typically produce a wealth of detailed information about a much smaller number of people and cases. This article therefore focuses on the current involvement of Black parents in education.

## Sample

A sample of ten schools – five primary and five secondary schools – was purposely selected. Nine of the schools are public schools and the tenth school is a private church primary school – the only Black private school in Port Elizabeth. All the schools are situated in the poor, disadvantaged areas of the Black townships. The majority of the learners attending these schools come from the neighbouring informal settlements. In each school the principal, the teachers, the learners and the chairpersons of the SGBs were interviewed. A total of 40 interviews were conducted as follows:

- 10 one-on-one interviews were conducted with the principals;
- 10 one-on-one interviews were conducted with the chairpersons of the SGBs;
- 10 focus group interviews were conducted with groups of six teachers from each school, and
- 10 focus group interviews were conducted with groups of six learners from each school.

Appropriate measures were taken to ensure that the sample was inclusive with equal representation of male and female teachers. The learners' group included boys and girls who were equally represented from all grades. All the interviews were in-depth, open-ended and each lasted 30-45 minutes. Focus-group participants were asked to commit to confidentiality as they were also assured of the confidentiality of their comments by the researcher who conducted the interviews. The respondents were encouraged to be as open and honest as possible. Interviews were captured on a tape recorder with the permission of the interviewees, and field notes were also taken to authenticate the recorded responses.

Neuman (2003:124) advises that informed consent to participate in the study must be sought from the participants. To fulfil this requirement, prior permission was sought from the district office of the Department of Education in Port Elizabeth to conduct the research in the schools. The principals, teachers and chairpersons of the SGBs agreed to sign the consent forms after the forms had been explained to them. Individual learner consent forms were not elicited as these were signed by the principals in their role as *in loco parentis* for the learners.

## Data analysis

All the tape-recorded interviews were fully transcribed and complemented with field notes. The data was then analysed using the inductive approach, which reflects frequently reported patterns (Thomas, 2003:1). This approach allows research findings to emerge from the frequent, dominant or significant themes in raw data without restrictions imposed by the structural methodologies. The next step was to generate categories, themes and patterns. In this study, six categories were created. To be included as a theme, supporting data had to be evident in all of the participating groups. The six themes identified for this study were:

- non-functional SGBs;
- illiteracy of SGB members;
- non-attendance of Black parents at SGB meetings;
- lack of teacher support for SGB members;
- lack of financial support by SGB members for schools, and
- lack of home-school communication (role of SGB in this process).

## Research findings

The study found that Black parents were aware of their obligation to be partners in the governance of the schools, but they could not involve themselves because of factors militating against their anticipated involvement. These factors are discussed in the ensuing paragraphs.

### Non-functional SGBs

According to the respondents, all the schools in the study had legally constituted SGBs which were, however, non-functional. The study found that the relationship between the teachers and the SGB parent members was not always ideal. One SGB chairperson remarked:

*The teachers undermine the authority of the SGB and abalawuleki [they are ungovernable], because andifundanga [I am not educated].*

An SGB chairperson described how teachers told him that they never signed a contract with the SGB and therefore, they cannot be held accountable to the SGB on any educational matters affecting their learners. Teachers, on the other hand, mentioned that the SGBs are part of the problem in school governance rather than part of the solution because they lack the professional skills to be partners with them. This was confirmed by the chairpersons themselves that the DoE never empowered them to perform their functions.

Only five of the ten chairpersons interviewed received some form of training on school governance. They regarded this as being insufficient training to prepare them adequately to execute all their delegated tasks. The question is whether workshops on an *ad hoc* basis are sufficient to develop the capacity of SGB members. In terms of this finding, it appears that more training needs to be done by the DoE to strengthen the role of SGBs in the governance of schools. It becomes futile to have an SGB in any school if such a body is not functional. This only causes unnecessary tension and conflict as evidenced by the teachers' responses quoted earlier. The relationship frustrates the teachers as it does not contribute to a healthy environment conducive to effective teaching and learning.

Teachers maintained that they received no training in working with parents and vice versa. One teacher commented:

*When the DoE introduced parental involvement in education, parents were not empowered on how to be meaningfully involved in school. It is not our duty to train them.*

Another teacher stated:

*We were never prepared to work with parents. The DoE first introduced the concept but never followed up with training.*

The study found that even during their initial teacher training period, teachers were never empowered or skilled to work in partnerships with parents. Both the chairpersons of the SGBs and the teachers intimated that they need the intervention of the DoE to conduct workshops for them on a continuous basis on how to work meaningfully together, identify areas in which they should work together, and generally set boundaries of each party's involvement in order to avoid conflict between the two parties.

### Illiteracy

Illiteracy was found to be one of the major reasons why parents do not form a partnership with other stakeholders in the governance of schools. Because parents lack literacy skills and cannot contribute much to issues of governance, chairpersons of SGBs admitted that they keep away from schools for fear of embarrassment due to their shortcomings. For similar reasons, they cannot support their children's education at home. The chairpersons of the SGBs pointed this out very clearly in their interviews. It was therefore not unusual to hear teachers describing parents as follows:

*They fear that because they are themselves not educated, they cannot contribute anything.*

*Parents cannot help with the work they themselves do not understand.*

*They are not acquainted with school policies and therefore they cannot participate in policy implementation.*

Learners concurred with their teachers that their parents cannot help them in subjects that require their parents to be educated. The chairpersons of the SGBs expressed similar views.

Interviewees' responses revealed that poor Black parents are not fully aware that they need to have at least some education to be sufficiently literate in order to involve themselves in the governance of their children's schools.

## Non-attendance at parent meetings

As partners in education, schools schedule general and specific parent meetings throughout the year with the purpose of sharing information pertaining to planned activities in the school. The finding was that generally township parents do not attend such meetings, not even to collect progress reports at the end of the year. One teacher remarked:

*We are keeping reports dating back to 1995.*

The chairpersons of the SGBs concurred that very few parents attend parent meetings even though many of them are not employed. Reasons cited for non-attendance of parent meetings include:

- work commitments;
- fear of being ridiculed and embarrassed for not paying school fees;
- the possibility that their children have been involved in some kind of misdemeanour, and
- the fear of being undermined by teachers who talk to them as if they are talking to young children.

Learners also admitted that they discouraged their parents from attending meetings because they do not see the rationale for parents individually attending meetings when they have the SGB to represent their interests and concerns. It was also found that learners prefer their parents not to visit the school for fear of ridicule by other learners. Peer pressure came out strongly as a factor affecting parent visits to schools. This allegedly happens mostly to poor families who live in informal settlements. When the school insists on learners bringing their parents to school, they prefer to *hire a presentable* parent rather than bring their own.

Some historical factors were also found to contribute to the parents' non-attendance of school meetings. It was found that parents do not understand why they have to attend school meetings when their own parents were never required to do so. The study also found that family structures militated against attendance of parent meetings. These include:

- grandmother-headed households where the grandmother is too old or sickly to attend meetings;
- child-headed households;
- households with absent fathers, and
- households with child mothers.

A partnership would require that the partners sit together at meetings and discuss issues of mutual interest. Parents' non-attendance at parent meetings forces teachers to unilaterally make decisions for the parents about their children. This untenable situation could alienate parents from their children. Ultimately, the quality of education to these learners would suffer.

## Lack of teacher support

The study revealed that parents as members of SGBs do not provide adequate support to teachers to perform their core duty of teaching. The general feeling among teachers was that parents do not value education, and this attitude rubs off on their children. It is difficult to teach such children and they become their worst enemies. Teachers identified the following areas in which parental partnership through their SGBs could make a difference:

- positive role modelling and discipline at home by parents;
- parents could assist teachers to create a safer environment at school;
- parents should ensure that their children attend school and arrive at school on time. Teachers remarked that learners who were frequently absent from school were associated with drug and alcohol consumption, and gangsterism. Naidoo (2007) suggested that when learners bunk school, they do not merely sit idly at home, but engage in antisocial behaviour. Teachers concurred that the high rate of pregnancy among the girls was attributed to lack of support by parents.

For effective teaching and learning to take place, a supportive environment needs to be guaranteed by a partnership between the schools and other community support services such as the police, health, as well as social and psychological services. Of the ten schools in this study, none had access to such services, which was found to be a cause for concern to teachers. They mentioned lack of services for HIV-positive learners and pregnant girls. In all the schools participating in the study, cases of theft and robberies on school premises were reported. An environment conducive to teaching and learning does not exist. The teachers blamed the parents (SGBs) for such a state of affairs in their schools. Learners felt dejected that their parents were not sufficiently empowered to assume their rightful roles as partners in education.

### Lack of financial support

Schools in South Africa receive money from the DoE according to their quintile classification. The principals and the teachers admitted that the allocation they receive is insufficient to run a school, and parents should make up the shortfall by paying school fees. SASA also makes provision to supplement the government allocation by requiring the SGBs to raise funds for their schools. However, learners felt strongly that historically disadvantaged schools should have greater capital injection by the DoE to improve the quality of resources available in their schools.

The study revealed that approximately 60% of parents fail to meet their financial obligations towards the schools. The reason advanced for this non-payment of school fees was that many parents are poor and unemployed. For those who receive a government child grant, paying school fees is not a priority. High-school learners in the study confessed that they did not see the rationale for their parents to pay fees if there was no transparency in the way the money was spent. They (learners), in fact, discourage their parents from paying school fees. Another reason cited for parents not meeting their financial obligations is that media reports inform them that education is free in South Africa so there is no need for them to pay school fees. One SGB chairperson mentioned that paying or not paying school fees is closely related to the culture of South Africans paying for services. He mentioned that township people are not used to paying municipal rates and service charges and that they treat school fee payments in the same manner. All the chairpersons admitted honestly that they never engaged in fundraising because they were not aware that it was obligatory for them to do so.

### Lack of home-school communication

For effective partnerships between home and school, communication lines need to be open between the two parties and boundaries need to be permeable for information to flow freely from school to the learners' homes and vice versa because the parties involved have a common interest – exposing the child to equal and quality education. The study sought to investigate the extent to which parents, as partners in education, communicate with the school and vice versa.

The study found that there was a one-way communication between home and school. It was from the schools to the homes and never the other way round. The perception, in this instance, might be that teachers want to communicate with the parents but the same cannot be said of the parents. The truth is that teachers send letters and notices home with the learners. This type of communicating cannot be effective for illiterate parents who rely on their children to read the letters for them. Learners decide what to tell their parents or what to keep from them, based on the contents of the letter. Sending a letter with a tear-off



slip was no guarantee that the reply slip was signed by the parent. Learners admitted to signing the tear-off slips themselves.

The principals admitted that, although they are aware that this form of communication is not effective, they nevertheless continue to use it because the telephone is expensive and most parents do not have telephones. Word of mouth is also not reliable as the message may depend on the interpretation of the message by the messenger – in this case the learner. Realising that the means of communication is not effective, teachers despondently stated that they have stopped communicating with parents. In essence, the study found that there is no home-school communication through the SGBs. Teachers work in isolation and make all kinds of decisions on behalf of the parents because there is no partnership between them and the SGBs.

The learners in the study noted that communication between their homes and schools flows in one direction – from teachers to parents. Meaningful communication must be two-way, constantly alternating between informing and listening. Teachers must seek effective ways of communicating with Black township parents. It is recommended that schools organise workshops for these parents and invite other partners in education to address them. It is in such workshops that it would be impressed upon the parents the importance of being role models as well as informing them of some ways in which they can assist their children even if they do not have an education.

This study was conducted among a homogeneous population of the township's poor and disadvantaged schools. The findings shed light on the challenges posed by SASA that requires township schools to partner with Black parents in the governance of schools. However, further investigation with a broader sample population is needed to extend this research to include multicultural, multiracial societies as well as rural populations in different geographical areas and settings.

## Conclusions and recommendations

It is now nearly sixteen years since SASA came into effect but the planned partnerships between Black parents in the Black townships of Port Elizabeth and their children's schools are far from being realised, as this research confirms. Township Black parents as SGB members and teachers are not working in partnership with each other. Even though many years have passed, it appears from this research that the DoE needs to allocate even greater financial and human resources to develop Black parents to become effective members of their SGBs.

Evidently, while several studies have been done on the subject of parental involvement in education, this study provided new insight into the *status quo* of Black parental involvement in the governance of schools. Based on the findings of this study, it can therefore be argued that schools must serve as learning centres for both Black parents and their children. In addition, it is imperative that schools in impoverished areas need to revisit what educators can expect from these parents.

Involving parents in school implies change. It implies that teachers have to learn to accommodate the SGB and to work hand in hand with them. It implies a change of mindset in both these parties. Both parties have to accept that the imperative to change was imposed by legislation in the form of SASA. It also implies that the parties involved must recognise a need for change.

It is the responsibility of both the educational managers and the teachers to initiate the participation and involvement of parents in school activities as active involvement will not happen by itself, by accident, naturally or easily or even by invitation. It demands hard work and initiative, planning and leadership skills from the educational leaders to achieve the goal of effective parental involvement. It must happen by explicit strategic intervention by the DoE and other relevant stakeholders and be purposely cultivated. School leaders who genuinely value learning communities must find ways to include and support the parents of every child in their school. Effective communication systems must be created between schools, parents and the broader community (Blankstein, 2004).

With the assistance of the DoE, the school should initiate the partnership process, with the principal acting as a catalyst. It is important that both staff and the SGB know and appreciate the rationale for their partnership. Both parties should know what they want to achieve and should therefore jointly draw up the

school's mission and vision. It should be realised that this involvement is not a once-off situation: it is a collegial process that never stops. The DoE cannot negate on its responsibility to empower the SGBs on how to fulfil their roles and perform their functions and to understand the dictates of SASA. In addition, school leaders who genuinely value their communities must form enduring partnerships and provide support for the parents of every child in their school and not leave it solely to the DoE.

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