

Governors' experiences of school principals' responsibilities in the democratic governance of schools in South Africa: Are they in agreement with the Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007?

Abstract

The *South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (SASA)* stipulates that all public schools in South Africa must have democratically elected school governing bodies, comprised of the principal (in his or her official capacity), representatives of educators; non-teaching staff; parents and learners; in the case of secondary schools. The reform in the Act is intended to foster tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making. This article reports on an empirical study which focused on the role of the principal in the school governing body (SGB) and reports on the findings of what governors in four different schools perceived as the role of school principals in the democratic governance of secondary schools in South Africa. Governors view the principal as in charge of the professional management of the school, ensuring that all duties are carried out adequately, setting the tone in SGB meetings, and responsible for interpreting education policies and ensuring that they are well implemented. They refer to principals as “the finger on the pulse of what is happening at school” or the resource persons for other members of the SGBs and “the engines” of the schools. Principals also enable implementation of democratic values such as tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making in schools through their leadership roles. Principals also have the responsibility of ensuring the maximum participation of both parent and learner governors in SGBs meetings. Principals can contribute to school governance issues, especially where they are familiar with official regulations, provincial directives and knowledge of educational reform measures. The findings also highlight the power struggles in rural schools that arise when principals overplay their roles.

The article also compares what governors perceived as the responsibilities of principals to what the Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 (ELAA) suggest as the responsibilities of principals; and there are many similarities between the functions of principals as stated in section 16A of the ELAA and those that governors perceived are the responsibilities of school principal. The article concludes that rather than reducing the functions of school principals; the ELAA expanded their functions.

Introduction

Through the establishment of school governing bodies in South Africa, principals are now experiencing considerably heavier workloads and escalating demands for accountability, and a seemingly never-ending schedule of meetings at a time of increasing scarcity of resources both human and material (Apple, 1999). Principals also have to deal with competing demands of both management and governance of schools. While dealing with the day-to-day management of the school, they are now obliged to assist governors to execute their functions as part of their new leadership role in the transformation of schooling in the country. School principals have a responsibility of exercising leadership that promotes participation by all stakeholders of the school in order to promote democracy, which is the key goal of education in South Africa (Department of Education, 2007).

Long before the restructuring of educational governance internationally, the principal's role was regarded as a complex task (see, for example, Phillips, 1990; Johnson, 1994). This role is becoming even more complex as impassioned calls for school reform in the form of greater accountability and shared governance, parental choice and school safety escalate within and outside schools (Levine, 2005; Southworth & Du Quesnay, 2005; Vick, 2004; Wilmore, 2000). Principals are also expected to have expert knowledge necessary to improve learner performance (Fusarelli & Smith, 1999; Hale & Moorman, 2003; Kent, 2002; McKerrow, Dunn & Killian 2003). A further challenge is that principals have to manage schools in a process of shared, collaborative educational thinking and leadership (Grogan &

Andrews, 2002; Johnson & Uline, 2005; Quinn, 2002; Vick, 2004) so that staff members will feel valued, respected and empowered (Hammersley-Fletcher & Brundrett, 2005; Johnson & Uline, 2005; McKerrow, Dunn & Killian, 2003; Vick, 2004). In general, principals are not sufficiently prepared to meet these challenges (Vick, 2004; Wilmore, 2000).

Kruger (2003) explores the significant effect that principals can have on the efficiency on the success of the school, including transforming the schooling system and encouraging greater participation in school governing bodies (SGBs). This implies changing the past autocratic structures to more democratic structures and tendencies. In the South African context this would include complying with changing legislation, regulations and personnel administrative measures; establishing a culture of teaching and learning; improving and maintaining high educational standards; collaborating with parents; dealing with multicultural school populations; managing change and conflict; coping with limited resources; and ensuring more accountability to their respective communities (Mestry & Grobler, 2004).

The focus of this paper was to explore what school governors perceive as the responsibilities of school principals rather exploring issues of the Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 (ELAA); however, ELAA has only been used to compare governors views to what the Act suggests as the responsibilities of principals. It is also very important to note that this research was conducted in 2004 and 2006, two years before ELAA became the law.

Democratic principles and practices

The philosophy underpinning this paper is a democratic theory of education. Davies (2002) argues that a democratic theory of education is concerned with the process of “double democratisation”, the simultaneous democratisation of both education and society. Conversely, without a more democratic system of education, the development of a democratic society is unlikely to occur. There

is now a considerable amount of international and comparative literature on democratic education, which includes the many arguments supporting it (Apple, 1993; Bean and Apple, 1999; Moggach, 2006; Murphy, 2006; Davies, Harber and Schweisfurth, 2002; Davies and Kirkpatrick, 2000; and Harber, 2004). This literature suggests that listening to learners, encouraging their participation and giving them more power and responsibility (i.e. greater democratisation) leads to a better functioning school.

Emphasising the need for the practice of democracy in schools, Carter, Harber and Serf (2003) suggest that some values, such as democracy, tolerance and responsibility, grow only as one experiences them. Therefore schools need to practise what they seek to promote. Bastian, Gittel, Greer, and Haskins (1986) and Wood (1992) maintain that democratic schools and democracy itself do not develop by chance, but they result from explicit attempts by educators, and thus schools, to put in place arrangements and opportunities that will bring democracy to life. Therefore, a democratic school is one that allows all stakeholders to participate in deliberations dealing with the school governance, where they are prepared to live in democracy through the acquisition of suitable knowledge, skills, attitudes and behaviours. In terms of this article, these skills, values, and behaviours are obtained through active democratic involvement of all the stakeholders of the school in the SGBs. The underlying assumption of this article is that democratically-governed schools function more effectively than their autocratic counterparts. The former are schools which honour participation, adequate representation, tolerance, deliberation and dialogue, and rational discussion, which all lead to collective decision-making.

Democratic school governance

Democratic school governance is a form of school-based management (SBM) that can be regarded as the most radical form of educational decentralisation. Edge (2000) defines school-level

governance as a form of decentralisation that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement and relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority to the school level as the primary means through which improvements are stimulated and sustained. Giddens (1984) and Sayed (2002) present some of the complexities of SBM. Giddens (1984) argues that it is a political activity, because it deals with both the allocative and distributive resources, and also involves education professionals and lay people who have their own views on what school is about and the way in which it should be organised. Sayed (2002) focuses on some functions of SGBs such as the appointment of staff, language policy and decisions on school fees which he argues tend to produce “more heat than light”, as some SGBs have tended to usurp their roles in carrying out their functions by using their powers to advance discriminatory measures by excluding other learners from schools. It would seem that “power relations are central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance, regardless of the cultural context in which they operate, and that power relations are an ineradicably feature of the fragile character of the school governing bodies as organizations” (Deem, Brehony and Heath, 1995: 133).

Internally, the school itself must be organised along democratic lines by creating the democratic structure that will allow all stakeholders to take part actively in the affairs of the school. In South Africa, school governance refers to the institutional structure that is entrusted with the authority to formulate and adopt school policy on a range of issues such as school budgets and developmental priorities, the code of conduct for learners, staff and parents, and broad goals on educational quality (Sithole, 1995). This implies that parents, teaching and non-teaching staff, the principal (in his or her official capacity), and learners should be involved in school governance. This in turn enables the stakeholders to develop a sense of ownership of the school and as such take responsibility and accept accountability for what is happening at the school.

Democratic school governance in South Africa emphasises that, whatever decisions are made in a school, they should be formulated on the basis of consultation, collaboration, co-operation, partnership, and participation of stakeholders of the SGB. The above is corroborated by Bean and Apple (1999), who contend that in a democratic school all stakeholders have the right to participate in the process of decision making; there should be widespread participation in addressing issues of governance and policy making through committees, councils (SGBs, in case of South Africa) and other school-wide decision-making groups that include professional educators, young people (learners), their parents and other members of the school community. Chapman, Froumin and Aspin (1995) provide a useful list of characteristics of democratic institutions as a framework for school governance. They suggest that policies and actions are based on decisions and are not arbitrary; all powers and rights are to be made available to the people in the state or an organisation accordingly; and the will of the majority prevails whilst the rights of minorities are preserved and respected. In a school situation this means that powers and responsibilities will be distributed more equally between all the stakeholders of the school, namely parents, learners and staff. Policies are formulated after rigorous deliberations, and all governors regardless of age, gender or race equally share power, which is a way in which democracy manifests itself.

In the light of the above overview, democratic school governance is defined as school governance in which there is a sharing of power by the principal and all the other relevant stakeholders such that policies made at school are democratically arrived at by rational discourse and deliberations by all the democratically elected representatives of different constituencies of the school, namely parents, learners and educators. From the exploration of the concepts of democracy and school governance, it is apparent that the link between the two can help to nurture and sustain a young democracy in South Africa, particularly in schools which were blighted by racism, riots and unrest.

Research problem and aim

The role of principals in school governing bodies was chosen as the best arena to investigate the interplay of power relations between professional and lay governors. The following research question was posed.

- What is the role of the principal in the democratic governance of secondary schools in South Africa?

Research Design

The nature of research questions necessitated the use of qualitative approach. A case study of four schools was conducted, employing in-depth interviews, observation, and documents. For ethical reasons, permission to conduct research in schools was sought from the relevant regional office, and access to documents and records was negotiated before the research was begun. Pseudonyms were used for each school to ensure confidentiality.

Sample of case study schools

The case study schools used are one former Model C school (Buchanan), one Coloured school (Hillside), one rural school (Village Green) and one township school (Melbourne). These schools were chosen because they continue to reflect the effects of racial division and unequal educational provision of during the apartheid era in South Africa.

Buchanan Secondary School is a former Model C co-educational secondary school situated in pleasant urban surroundings in a rural town in KwaZulu-Natal. The local neighbourhood is racially

integrated and consists of middle-class families; however, white residents predominate. It is a historically privileged school compared to the other three schools. 622 learners are enrolled at Buchanan and there are 28 educators. The majority of teaching as well as non-teaching staff is white. Only 60% of the learners can afford to pay school fees of R5 000 per year; and 40% qualify for fee exemption. Buildings are large and well maintained compared to the other three schools.

Hillside Secondary School is a co-educational secondary school formerly reserved for Coloured learners, although Indian learners have been admitted since the end of the apartheid era. Most educators are Coloured and lately the school has also acquired Indian as well as black staff members. The school is relatively advantaged and offers a wide range of academic subjects. The surrounding community comprises middle-class as well as working-class residents, and half the learners commute from the surrounding rural areas in search of better-quality education. The building of the school are dilapidated, and, according to the chairperson of the governing body this is because they were vandalised in the past and have not since been repaired, mainly because of financial shortfalls. 60% of learners qualify for fee-exemption and only 40% can pay school fees of R1200 per year. The school enrolls 800 learners and has 22 educators.

Village Green Secondary School is a co-educational rural school attended by black learners. The school is relatively disadvantaged, but better resourced than many other rural schools. It has, for example, an electricity supply. However, the number of classrooms is inadequate, and as many as 95 learners sometimes have to crowd into a single classroom. All members of the teaching staff are black. Learners in the school are ethnically homogeneous and speak isiZulu. The local community consists of a few working-class families, and unemployment in the area is very high. The buildings are in reasonably good repair for this type of school. The parents of 70% of the learners qualify for exemption from the school fees of R150 per annum. Education authorities regard this as one of the better rural schools in the region. The school enrolls 575 learners per year and has 17 teachers.

Melbourne Secondary School is a co-educational township school attended by black learners only. As a township school, it is relatively advantaged compared to rural schools. It has more classrooms per learners than the rural school, but classrooms are still overcrowded with approximately 75 learners per classroom. All members of the teaching staff are black and speak IsiZulu. The buildings are relatively well looked after and were renovated ten years ago. The school enrolls 790 learners per year and has 24 teachers. The parents of 50% of learners cannot afford to pay the school fees of R300 per year and thus qualify for fee exemption.

Data gathering

The data were collected between the months of September and December 2006. Interviews, observation, and documents were the principal methods of data gathering. The interviewing process involved 32 forty-minute individual interviews. A common interview schedule was used for all the participants regardless of their constituency. The following governors were interviewed on the role of principals each SGB: chair of governors, the principal, two educator governors, one non-teaching staff governor, two parent governors, and two learner governors.

I observed two formal meetings of SGBs in each school to obtain “real-life experience in the real world” (Robson, 2002). Informal observations in the form of unplanned observations in the field also occurred. In addition, documentary sources were examined to complement the other methods used for data collection, and to enhance accountability. However, they were not analysed with a view to obtaining substantive evidence. The main documents used were meeting agendas and minutes of the SGBs, letters to parents, annual reports to parents, discipline records and curriculum materials.

The data analysis

For interviews, observation and documents, the data were analysed using qualitative research procedures. Interviews were transcribed and coded, and responses grouped according to the questions asked. EXCEL was used to record the initial data before the governors' responses were studied to determine what the respondents' perceptions of principals' responsibilities in SGBs were. Using the NVIVO-NUDIST, a programme for analysing qualitative data, the functions were sorted out and were grouped according to the perceptions of governors from each school.

The schools selected were not based on a random sample so the findings cannot be generalised to the larger population of schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal or South Africa. They reflect the views of governors in the four case study schools only.

Research Findings

The following views on the roles of the principals demonstrate the different contextual realities in which schools operate in South Africa.

Principal's role in school governing bodies

Section 20 of *the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996* (SASA) stipulates the functions of SGBs. Governors from the four case study schools were asked to state what they believed the actual roles of principals in the school governing body are. Governors listed what they perceived as the roles and functions of principals in SGBs.

Village Green Secondary School

The principal:

- Knows what is happening in the school so can inform the SGB
- Guides members of the SGB whether they act according to the Act, encouraging them to conduct meetings properly
- Interprets the education policy to other stakeholders of the school
- A leader, nothing can be done without the principal
- A link between the department, SGB and the school
- A resource person for other members of the SGB
- Acts as a mediator between the SGB and the Department
- Controls the SGB as he knows the processes of education
- Ensures that every member of the SGB performs functions as required by the Act
- Informs the SGB of what is happening in the school as he is always at school
- Ensures educational policies are in force
- Performs and carries out professional management functions of the school
- A representative of the Department ensuring that rules and regulations are kept accordingly in the school.

Hillside Secondary School

The principal:

- Has to ensure the school is running effectively
- Always in the school to see that all duties are carried out, and to make sure things go right in the school
- Plays an important role in the day-to-day running of the school
- Ensures if everything goes according to the Act and decisions are taken in fairness

- Acts as facilitator and attends all SGB meetings and is a member of each sub-committee, for example finance committee
- Forms the link with the Department and the school and the SGB
- Dictates to the SGB, he has to show that he is in control of the day-to-day running of the school
- Always on the spot and monitors everything, and liaises with the SGB.

Buchanan Secondary School

The principal:

- A link between all stakeholders of the school, including the Department
- In charge of the day-to-day management of the school and the implementation of policy and curriculum, it is therefore imperative that he reports on these matters and has a say in decisions taken in the SGB meetings
- Listens to staff, makes decisions on school matters
- Responsible for the physical planning of the school
- A representative of all the stakeholders of his the school
- Sees to it that the SGB performs its function according to the SASA, for example, ensuring that learners do not get tested before they are admitted in the school
- Sets the tone of meetings of the SGB
- Deals with a lot of parents, and is involved with the day-to-day running of the school
- The “finger on the pulse of what is happening”
- In charge of the SGB, gives a report of his daily running of the school thus informing them of the issues and problems to address
- Keeps the SGB informed of all activities taking place at the school and also reports to the SGB any issues or problems at school,

Melbourne Secondary School

The principal:

- Is essential to the functioning of the SGB
- is the manager of the school, and is always on the spot
- informs all other stakeholders of the school of the issues and needs of the school and also coordinates meetings of the school governing body
- has a responsibility to keep parents informed of all what is happening in the school and to take decisions together with the SGB
- is a link between all the parties in the school
- influences the SGB and many suggestions come from him since he is always at school while the SGB is hardly there
- informs the SGB of the needs and problems of the school that may hinder the smooth functioning of the school
- sees to the daily running of the school
- is the engine of the institution and a resource person.

All 32 governors interviewed felt that the principal was the most powerful member on the body. They described the principal as the one who controls or dictates policy in the SGB or as the leader of the SGB without whom nothing could be accomplished. This runs counter to democratic governance (where it is the chair of governors' responsibility to steer the SGB) and may represent a conflict between the functions of management and governance.

Principals are in charge of the professional management of the school, ensure that all duties are carried out correctly in the daily functioning of the school, and inform the SGB of issues, problems or

activities at the school. Research findings have illustrated what governors believe are the functions and responsibilities of principals in the SGBs. Section 16 of the SASA does not define the role of principals in SGBs; it ambiguously states that the governance of public school is vested in its SGB, and the professional management of the school must be undertaken by the principal under the authority of the Head of Department. Although the functions of school governing are more clearly stated in section 20 of the South African Schools Act 84, 1996, some of the descriptions of these functions have tended “to produce more heat than light” (Sayed, 2002). Section 16A in ELAA clearly states the functions and responsibilities of principal of a public school which are broadly stated as follows:

- (1) The principal of a public school represents the Head of Department in the governing body when acting in an official capacity
- (2) The principal *must* undertake the professional management of a public school by carrying out duties as stipulated in the ELAA 2007, and
- (3) The principal *must* assist the governing body in the performance of its functions and responsibilities, but such assistance or participation should not be in conflict with stipulations of the Department of Education.

According to these functions, the principals are responsible for the professional management of the school and to support the SGBs of their schools. The implication is that if these functions are not executed as per instruction, corrective measures could follow as outlined by the insertion of sections 58B (identification of underperforming public schools) and 58C (compliance with norms & standards). This gives the Head of Department the right to implement the incapacity code and procedures for poor work performance. This is another manner in which the functions of principals are extended, which is also in agreement with what governors suggested that “principals are the finger of the pulse” since they know the situation intimately, they can offer suggestions and thus influence the SGB since parent SGB members are only occasionally at school. Most governors also

felt that the principal was in a better position to interpret education policies to other stakeholders, as he or she is better informed on issues in education, can ensure that education policies and the curriculum are implemented, coordinates SGB meetings and ensures that requirements of the Act are adhered to. As one participant said, "He, the principal, is the finger on the pulse of what is happening. He is a resource person for other members of the SGB and the engine of the institution."

The principals' task is complicated by their being regarded by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 as the representatives of the Department of Education and at the same time being members of the SGB. Principals are a link and a mediator between the Department, SGB and the school, but have to ensure that rules and regulations are kept in the school. Furthermore, although it is the responsibility of the Provincial Department of Education to provide introductory and continuing training for the newly-elected members of the SGBs, section 19, 2 of SASA also requires the Provincial Department of Education to ensure that the principals render all necessary assistance to the SGBs so that they can perform their functions effectively (RSA, 1996). The principal's responsibility for providing consistent training and other form of capacity building concomitantly reinforces and extends the role of the school principal as a key figure in the promotion of a functional SGB.

Observations at schools which were operating democratically: Buchanan, Hillside and Melbourne showed that the SGB chair took the lead in the governing body, which is a sign that the state's aim of promoting democracy in schools is being achieved. At Hillside, the chair of governors explained that the positive relationship with the principal was possible because she had previously worked as an educator for many years in the school. At Village Green matters were very different. Here the principal tended to overplay his role, leading to difficulties in the functioning of the SGB in the school and creating tension between the chair of governors, a parent governor and the principal.

When asked, a parent governor argued that the most difficult decision the SGB was involved in involved the expulsion of a learner who had stabbed another learner. This governor alleged that the principal and his SMT took the decision on their own to expel the learner. At the hearing of the case, which was conducted after the learner had already been expelled, the teaching staff falsely contended that the SGB had recommended the expulsion of this learner. Parents and learners were never involved in that decision. The governor claimed that parent and learner governors endorsed the decision taken by principal and his SMT because they did not want to be seen as betraying the principal. The running of the SGB at Village Green was generally problematic. According to one parent governor, at times when a member of the SGB raised issues trying to check if the Act was being followed, he/she was seen as a sell-out and nobody took him/her seriously. This parent governor contended that the majority of members had been brainwashed to believe that the principal and educators were always right.

What governors listed as the role of principals in each school represents the different realities that prevail in different contexts in schools; different circumstances and priorities meant that the role of the principal was not the same at the four schools. In all cases, as Deem, Brehony and Heath (1995), point out, power relations were central to any understanding of the practices and processes of school governance. Apple (1993) has argued that democratising education is always coupled with conflict with the dominant traditions of schooling democracy; there are inevitable tensions and contradictions. Even in well-functioning SGBs, there were power relations at work. For example where the principal and his school management team (SMT) took a decision concerning learner discipline instead of, more legitimately, by the SGB comprised of all the stakeholders namely educators, parents and learners. A parent governor argued:

The principal and his SMT expelled a learner who had stabbed another learner but on the hearing of the case, which was conducted after the learner was already expelled, the SMT

falsely mentioned that the SGB had recommended the expulsion of this learner. Parents and learners were never involved in that decision, but we, as the SGB, had to endorse the decision taken by principal and his SMT...Parents and learners were not consulted when a wrong decision was taken. In addition, neither correct procedures, nor proper tribunals were followed... At times as a SGB member you can raise issues trying to check if the Act is being followed and you end up by a one-out, no one takes you seriously.

The complexity and weight of their task demands that contemporary principals have a clear understanding of their role and that of the SMTs in order to avoid the conflict that exists in some SGBs (see Heystek, 2004). As Kruger (2006) points out, a principal can exercise a significant effect on the efficiency of the success of the school, which at the same time expands his or her duties, as suggested earlier. Essentially, it is the principal's responsibility to create conditions in which learners can receive quality education in a democratic environment (Heck, 1992; Olson, 2000). This is evident when one considers section 8A of the ELAA that deals with random search and seizure of drugs and dangerous weapon. The principal has to have a clear understanding of this section; its application and principles. For example, principals need to have a clear understanding of the search and seizure process by understanding the definition of drugs (a substance that has a psychological or physiological effect) and what is meant by unlawful possession. The search has to be done in the best interest of the learners in question and has to be performed by the principal or his or her delegate (who is of the same gender as the learner), and has to be conducted in a private area, not in view of another learner, only once there is fair suspicion that a learner is in possession of drugs or dangerous weapon. When the search is being conducted, there should be one adult witness of same sex as learner, and the search in question should not include a search of a body cavity of the learner. In addition, health and safety of a learner has to be guaranteed when the search is being conducted. Finally, seized dangerous weapon or drugs should be correctly labelled indicating the name of

learner; time and date of search and seizure; incident reference number; person who searched the learner; the name of the witness; and that has to be handed over to the police immediately. However, this new function of the principal places the lives of principals and educators at stake; as they are expected to conduct the process of search and seizure, as well as the further extension of the functions and responsibilities of principals.

Another dilemma in this amendment is the lack of learner representation during the search and seizure process since there is only one adult witness, which could lead to abuse or social injustice such as the exclusion from the school of a learner whom the members of staff regard as problematic. As already noted, search and seizure further extends the duties and responsibilities of a principal who is already overburdened.

Furthermore, the absence of involvement of relevant departments (like the police, social services) during the search and seizure process, presents some concerns and challenges. This is complicated by the subsection 4d which suggests that the search should not extend to a search of a body cavity of the learner. The above section of the Act is silent on what needs to be done or who should conduct the search and seizure process if there is suspicion that the drugs have been inserted in a body cavity of the learner.

In sum principals play a key role in the extent to which all stakeholders participate in the SGB, transformation in schools, changing from the past autocratic tendencies to more democratic ones, and exercising leadership which leads to quality education for learners, which means changing past autocratic structures to promote a more democratic, transformational type of leadership which encourages participation of all stakeholders of the SGBs (Singh and Lokotsch (2005).

In any event, democratising education is always coupled with conflict with the dominant traditions of schooling (Apple, 1993; Deem et al. 1995). The Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 was an

attempt to resolve the situation. Section 8A of the ELAA is an attempt to improve discipline in schools and thus create an environment conducive to teaching and learning that would possibly help provide the delivery of quality education for all learners in schools. Section 16A is also aimed at clearly demarcating the functions of the principal and those of the SGBs and thus eliminating the uncertainties related to these. There are many similarities noted in the functions of principals as stated in section 16A of the ELAA and those that governors believed are the responsibilities of school principals. The only difference is the tone in which they are presented in the Act; which is more compelling and seemingly autocratic.

The above complexities demonstrate difficulties which schools in different contexts face in South Africa, and the gap between policy and practice. Jansen (2002) comments on the failure of policies in developing countries caused by several factors such as lack of resources, inadequate educator training, the lack of proper implementation strategies and the incoherence of policies in the education. In his view, education policies in South Africa were designed without considering the strategies for their implementation. The cause of all this, he argues, is that it was inevitable that policy formulation was dominated by political symbolism. South Africa had to be seen to be moving away from apartheid to a post-apartheid society. Sayed (2002) argues that there is a need for greater clarity about different roles and responsibilities of different levels of the state and that the state needs to play a more proactive role in supporting the democratisation of schools by enabling SGBs to deal with conflict and contestation. Sayed renders the warning that,

“...changing policy intention does not immediately translate into changed practice. Democracy in school governance within the context of the policy of educational decentralisation will not only take more time, but will require more proactive action to support and capacitate SGBs to become vehicles of democracy...The debates about SGBs reflect this tension and the SGB lies at the interface of the conflicts” (Sayed 2002:45).

Although the ELAA is a step in a positive direction, it is going against the aim of democratic school governance, which is to transform the schools, and focuses instead on creating conditions conducive to learners receiving quality education through establishing safe environment for learners. The principal does not seem to have much flexibility in his or her duties related to the professional management of the school and also to assisting the SGB in carrying out its functions.

Conclusion

This article highlights the important functions that principals fulfil with regard to the functioning of the SGB. Governors view the principal as in charge of the professional management of the school, ensuring that all duties are carried out adequately, setting the tone in SGB meetings, and as being responsible for interpreting education policies including curriculum documents and ensuring that they are well implemented. Governors refer to principals as “the finger on the pulse of what is happening at school”; they are resource persons for other members of the SGBs and “the engines” of the schools. Principals can also contribute greatly to school governance issues, since they are usually at an advantage in terms of their familiarity with official regulations, provincial directives and knowledge of educational reform measures. However, they should be willing to share their power and authority and do all they can to encourage parent and learner participation so the SGB can function effectively. Principals should especially guard against taking crucial decisions without involving parent and learner governors. If principals overplay their roles, they may end up reducing the SGBs to mere puppets, as was the case at the rural school.

Principals have wide-ranging duties on top of their traditional duties, as they have to introduce new members to legal issues affecting SGBs. Furthermore, principals have the responsibility of ensuring the maximum participation of both parent and learner governors in SGBs meetings. In addition, they

need to implement democratic values such as tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making in schools through their leadership roles.

Finally, the article compared what governors perceived as the responsibilities of principals with what the Education Laws Amendment Act 31, 2007 (ELAA) lists as the responsibilities of principals. There are many similarities between the functions stated in the Act and the perceptions of governors; even though the tone in which they are presented in the Act is more compelling and seemingly autocratic. In this article I argue that the ELAA attempts to provide for the conditions of delivery of quality education by improving discipline in schools and preventing the conflicting roles between school principals and other governors. However, instead of reducing the burden of principals the ELAA expands the principals' responsibilities: principals have to engage on daily professional management of the school and are also obliged to assist the SGB in the performance of its function. In many schools, the principal have since been performing the tasks of the SGBs.

The findings show that priorities vary in different schools so the role of the principal will be shaped by the particular school in which he operates. This article recommends that principals should create a space for debate, dialogue so that parents and learners participate sufficiently in SGBs and thus feel part of the decision-making processes or what Martin and Holt (2002) refer to as "joined-up governance". In addition the article concludes that more should be done by the Provincial Departments of Education to support principals in transforming schools and in providing the delivery of quality education for all learners. This lack of support has been regarded by most commentators as the shortcoming of the ELAA; that it places too much emphasis on the role of principals in improving conditions of schools with little or no mention being made of the support the principals will receive from Provincial Departments of Education.

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