# SCHOOL GOVERNANCE: A CASE STUDY INVESTIGATING
# THE GOVERNANCE CAPACITY OF THE
# FARM SCHOOL GOVERNING BODY

By

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**Abstract**

School governance at South African schools is now almost twelve years old. In these twelve years some schools have made great strides whilst others are still facing various challenges.

This research article is a qualitative, empirical and a descriptive case study, based on two farm schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal Province. It has investigated the governance capacity of both farm school governing bodies (SGB) in the execution of their roles and responsibilities together with the challenges that they faced using a documentary study and with structured interviews in a focus group. The structure for writing this article used the four principles as designed by Yin (1994) which are; Conceptualization, Contextual details, Data collection and Analytical strategies.

Evidence from this Research indicate that the Farm School Governing Body face many contextual challenges and that a tailor-made Governance capacity building programme be made available to farm schools so that they (SGB) are able to carry out their roles and responsibilities effectively.

*Keywords:*

1. School governance: School governance means determining the policy and rules by which a school is to be organized and controlled by a legitimately elected Governing Body. It includes ensuring that such rules and policies are carried out effectively in terms of the law and the budget of the school.

2. School Governing Body (SGB): Section 24 of SASA (1996: 18) stipulates that the SGB will consist of a member or members from each of the following categories:

    a. Parents of learners at school.
    b. Educators at the school.
    c. Members of staff at the school, who are not educators.
    d. Learners in grade the eighth grade or higher at the school.
    e. The farm owner, if it is a public school on a private property (Section 14).

## Introduction

South African schools now have a framework for managing the most important features of school life by way of school governance by parents who constitute the School's Governing Body (SGB). The SGB has the responsibility of determining the most important features of the school, such as its language, religion and admission policy, making recommendations about the appointment of educators and so forth while the state continues to provide the resources for employing educators, providing the physical infrastructure of the school and supporting the school's basic service needs..

The SGB on farm schools face a number of challenges. These challenges stem from a number of sources, from within the school, from a community perspective and from the school setting itself. This research will contend that farm school governing bodies face challenges that are unique, given the historical background of farm schools and their social realities.

This research article has undertaken a case study using two farm schools from the Ilembe District, to investigate the governance capacity and their challenges. Whilst there is a concerted attempt to take ownership of the schools by the SGB, their plight is hindered by factors beyond their control. In the context of these realities, there is compelling evidence that suggest that farm school SGBs face an even worse plight as compared to their urban counterparts.

## Conceptualization

School governance is the key arena when determining the climate, ethos and the conditions under which learning and teaching must take place.

In *Understanding the South African Schools Act* (DOE, 1997) stipulates that the governing body is responsible for governing the school. This does not mean that the SGB must run the school on a day-to-day basis, but it must;

- Perform all the specific functions given to governing bodies by SASA and by provincial legislation and regulations;
- set, improve and develop the rules, direction and policy by which the school must function within the framework of SASA;

- oversee and keep overall control over the development and maintenance of the infra-structure and property of the school and

- bring about and develop a partnership between all stakeholders, namely parents, learners, educators other staff at the school, the local community and the educational authorities (DOE, 1997:11).

In the context of farm schools, the SGB has to play a crucial role, given the fact that until 1996, farmers played a major role in managing and governing farm schools. Research on farm schools conducted by Motimele (2005) concluded that the "SGBs face many difficulties that threaten their effectiveness and their ability to carry out their roles and responsibilities". Some of their difficulties are described below:

- SGBs have been forced to focus on budgeting rather than on issues relating to teaching and learning.

- SGBs have been handed the responsibility of fund raising and therefore unequal funding for schools persists.

- SGB training has been inadequate and has not prepared members to deal with their complex responsibilities and roles (Chaka & Dieltiens, 2004).

Furthermore, the Farm school's Briefing Report (2000) as well as the Report on the Ministerial Review Committee, (2004) highlighted the fact that there were significant differences in the learning environment in farm schools as compared to other schools in the public sector, largely because of the governance challenges faced by the SGBs. The governance capacity of the SGB was crucial since it played a leading role in providing support to the principal and staff in the provision of good quality education.

The significance of this research was therefore to gain a better understanding of the capacity and challenges of farm school SGBs and what was needed to be done to capacitate them to perform their functions effectively.

*Farm schools: Briefing*
Vally, (2004) presented a briefing report on the latest developments regarding farm schools on 14th January 2000. The briefing highlighted significant differences in the learning and

teaching environments of farm schools as compared to other public schools. Some of the most important findings about farm schools are listed below:

1. Schools are isolated from other schools and are often far from towns.
2. Schools tend to be small, having fewer than 100 learners, and are generally served by one or two educators.
3. The physical structure of many schools is poor, and the majority does not have basic services and facilities.
4. Often grade levels offered at a school do not conform to the regular phases of the school period.
5. A few schools offer classes beyond grade seven.
6. Learning materials are poorly provided and virtually no schools have libraries or specialized classrooms for science or home economics.
7. Many learners walk long distances to school and travel subsidies, if provided at all, are limited.
8. Teachers either live on the farms or have to travel from a town at their own expense.
9. Professional development opportunities for educators are limited, owing to the remoteness of the school.
10. In-service courses may not deal with the particular conditions in farm schools, such as managing small schools or teaching multi-grade classes. These difficulties pose particular challenges to educators and learners (Farm School Briefing, 2000).

Conditions in farm schools since 2000 had not changed. On 22nd September 2007, the Trade Union in North West Province expressed the concern about "the poor education system, in particular for farm workers' children who travel distances to get education, with no food, no protection and no transport" and that "some educators are working under very bad conditions, including threats by farmers, poor infrastructure and poor health and safety conditions" (COSATU Memo, 2007).

The significance of these Reports was that they highlighted the conditions and challenges of farm schools. Despite the challenges, farm school SGBs were expected to make a meaningful contribution towards the governance of the school.

*Purpose of the study*

The purpose of this study was therefore to perform an in-depth descriptive case study in order to gain a deeper understanding of the capacity and challenges facing the SGB at farm schools and how these impact on their roles and responsibilities.

*Objectives of the Study*

The aim of this research was therefore to investigate the capacity of farm school SGBs and how effective or ineffective they were, in carrying out their roles and responsibilities. In order to accomplish this task, it was hoped that the following objectives would be realized:

1. To assess the competency level of the SGB in school policies.
2. To evaluate the training received.
3. To determine the kind of support provided by the SGB to the principal and staff.
4. To explore other challenges faced by the SGB in the execution of their functions.

*Research questions*

In order to achieve the desired objectives the following questions were asked:

1. Tell us how does it feel to be a member of a farm school governing body?
2. Share with us your role and experiences in drawing up school policies.
3. If training is made available to the SGB, what are some of the aspects that the SGB will require so that they are able to perform their duties effectively?
4. How do you support the principal and staff?
5. Share with us your problems/challenges/difficulties in governing a farm school.

**Contextual Framework**

*Historical management of farm schools*

Historically, farm schools were designed to assert 'white domination' (Convention on the Child, Article 1, November 20, 1989). It was therefore in the interest of the white farmer to build a school to keep the children busy while their parents (predominantly Native Africans) worked on their farm. The result of these actions led to the formation of farm schools.

Farm owners had full control of management and governance of the school. The farm owner or his nominee was responsible for the selection and dismissal of educators, maintaining of school records and control of learner enrolment. He had the right to remove children during

contact time in order to work on his farm. Native children from neighboring farms could attend school but with the permission of the farm owner on whose property the school was located.

By 1986, there were 5 399-farm schools in South Africa. Although farm schools formed 76% of the total number of schools in the country, there was only one school that offered secondary education (Education Rights Project, 2004).

*The Provision of Education for Black Pupils in Rural Areas Report*, (1986) attempted to resolve the ambiguities around the legality and governance of farm schools. This gave rise to the Education Laws Amendment Act of 1988. This Act prohibited farmers to employ children during teaching time to work casually on the farms. However a farmer was entitled to employ children over fifteen years of age provided that the children were enrolled at his school.

By 1994 the State fully guaranteed the cost covered for the building of new farm schools provided that, in return, the farmer entered into a contractual agreement with the Provincial Department of Education.  The farm owner had to keep the school open for a period of twenty years. However the farmer was still responsible for providing services such as water and electricity and doing the necessary maintenance of the school.

The South African Schools Act (SASA, Act 84 of 1996) placed a new legal framework for all schools in South Africa. The framework distinguished two types of schools – public (state run) and independent (private). Farm schools had a hybrid status, being deemed to be a public school on private property as catered for in Section 14 (1) of the South African Schools Act.

Whilst SASA provided for a uniform system for the organization, governance and funding for all schools, it did not take contextual factors affecting farm schools into consideration.

### Current legal status of farm schools

Section 14(1) of SASA (1996) states that "a public school may be provided on private property only in terms of an agreement between the Member of the Executive Council

(MEC) for Education (Provincial Education Minister) and the owner of the private property",
(1996:11). According to section 14(5) of the Act, such an agreement must provide for:

1. The provision of education and the performance of the normal functions of a public school.
2. Governance of the school, including the relationship between the governing body of the school and the owner.
3. Access by all interested parties to the property by the school.
4. Maintenance and improvement of the school buildings and the property on which the school stands and the supply of the necessary services and
5. Protection of the owner's rights in respect of the property occupied or used by the school (SASA: 11).

In addition, section 56 of SASA states that:

> "If an agreement contemplated in section 14 (above) does not exist at the commencement of this Act, in respect of a school standing on private property and which is deemed to be a public school in terms of section 52(1), the Member of the Executive Council must take reasonable measures to conclude such an agreement within six months of the commencement of this Act" (SASA: 25).

According to the Education Rights Project, (2004) the impact of this Act (52 (1)) resulted in that approximately 15 percent of farm schools across the country closing during the period between 1996 and 2000. Possible reasons for the decline in numbers included: low enrolment, eviction of parents, farm owner's request for closure, farm owner demanding compensation, amalgamation of schools and urbanization**.**

*Access to education in rural areas with special emphasis to farms*
 According to the National Department of Education Statistics (2006), 300 000 children still did not attend school across the country. There were many reasons for this non-schooling. Reasons varied from a lack of services for children with special needs, to a child's inability to pay school fees. However rural education was confronted with even more challenges such as the poor condition of schools, high levels of parent illiteracy and poverty, lack of parental participation in SGB, a lack or high cost of transportation, and the shortage of qualified permanent educators. This situation is still prevalent today.

In 2006, the National Government committed itself to implement a no-fee school policy to address the problem of poverty. Whilst most farm schools were ranked as quintile one, which made them a no-fee paying school, the problem of transportation in farming communities have not yet been addressed. Learners still have to walk long distances to get to school, making them vulnerable to rape and abuse.

According to project manager, Mbali Seheri of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE, 2003), farm schools are "plagued by learner dropouts, teenage pregnancies and child prostitution". His report also highlighted the issue of child labour. Child labour was perhaps the most disturbing practice occurring at farm schools. A Farm School in the Camperdown district in KwaZulu-Natal reported that learners were routinely forced to assist in harvesting crops. This practice was terminated by legislation in 1988.

The state of education and governance in farm schools has been largely neglected, un-researched and un-evaluated. Statistics about farm schools were not presented separately but were included collectively as in those of public schools. Consequently there is no clear picture of the current status of farm schools and their governance.

*Creeping towards Section 14-Concluding MEC/Owner Agreements*
In 1996 the government aimed to consolidate the issue of farm schools. Following the South Africans School's Act (1996) and the recommendations of the Hunters Commission (1996), the ownership of property would no longer imply control over the way the school was run. All farm schools would now be transferred into public hands.

Like all other schools, farm schools would now be in the hands of a school governing body made up of parents, teachers and the farm owner. The Act also stipulates that the farm school would only be allowed to operate if there was a signed agreement between the property owner and the Provincial MEC of Education. Deloitte and Touche, (Vally, 2004) undertook to draw a contractual agreement on behalf of the Department of Education with the following undertakings;

- maintain the building at state expense,
- fund any additional structures that may be required, but only after the conclusion of an additional written agreement authorizing the additions,

- compensate the owner for any additional expenses arising from ownership of the land occupied by the school and
- indemnify them for any claims for damages arising out of educational activity at the school (Education Rights Project, 2004).

In the Eastern Cape, 95 out of 490 farm schools signed contractual agreements during October 2002.  In the same period, Northern Province concluded 104 out of 392 agreements; Mapumulanga, 112 out of 324; Free State, 676 out of 1338 and in Kwa-Zulu Natal, 87 out of 775. Other provincial departments did not respond to the request for statistics on Section 14 implementation as indicated in the Education Rights Project (2004).

Given my experience, there are many farm school SGBs that are not aware of the current status of the very school that they are supposed to govern. It was therefore imperative that knowledge and an understanding of farm schools and their governors were necessary.

*Historical background on the origins of the South African school governance system*
Prior to 1994, there were fifteen apartheid education ministries in South Africa. Each department had its own school models, with its own funding formula and its own distinct approaches to state-parent relationships (Karlsson et al. 2001:147; Pampallis, 1993:21-26). In all departments, school level governance structures existed. These were known as school committees, school boards or management councils. These structures comprised of parent representatives who had limited decision-making powers and their main function was to fund raise for the school. However they did have some influence over the appointment or dismissal of educators.

Education White Paper 6 (2001:12) appointed    the Hunter Commission   to look into Organization, Governance and Funding of Schools. The Commission recommended the establishment of a single, unified and uniform system of education resulting in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996. This Act required the active and innovative participation of educators, parents, learners and members of the community resulting in the formation of the School Governing Body (SGB).

The SGB formed the "third largest public elections in South Africa" (Report of the Ministerial Review Committee, 2004:4). Every three years, close to five million parents have the right to vote for their school governors. This opportunity was afforded to the members of the SGB to experience the challenges and the benefits of holding a public official position.

*The role of the arm school governing Body*

Although the school governance system is now twelve years in existence, it has not been established how effective the SGB of a farm school is. The general purpose of SGBs is to perform its functions efficiently in terms of SASA (1996). The SGB is therefore placed in a position of trust. It has to carry out all its duties and functions and be accountable for its actions. All members of the SGB must know their duties and functions and how these responsibilities collectively support the provision of quality education for all its learners.

SASA (1996) stipulated the following functions to all governing Bodies of public schools:
- Promote the best interests of the school and ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school,
- Adopt a constitution,
- Develop the mission statement of the school
- Adopt a code of conduct for learners at the school,
- Support the principal, educators and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions,
- Determine times of the school day consistent with any applicable conditions of employment of staff at the school,
- Administer and control the school's property and buildings and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels if applicable,
- Encourage parents, learners, educators and other staff at the school to render voluntary services to the school,
- Recommend to the Head of Department the appointment of educators at the school,
- Recommend to the Head of Department the appointment of non-educator staff, at the request of the Head of Department,
- allow the reasonable use under fair conditions of the facilities of the school for educational programmes not conducted by the school (SASA, Section 20, (1)).

In addition to the above, SGBs may apply to the Head of Department of Education to perform the following allocated functions**:**

- To maintain and improve school property.
- To determine the extra-mural curriculum of the school and choice of subjects options.
- To purchase textbooks, educational materials and/or equipment for the school.
- To pay for the services of the school and or
- Other functions consistent with the Act and any other national or provincial Act (SASA, Section 21 (1)).

For effective teaching and learning to take place it is essential that the governing body be empowered to exercise these functions effectively. It is therefore safe to assume that the SGB of a school can be equated to Operational Managers of a school.

*Management of SGB meetings*

SGB meetings are platforms for members to share information, plan for the future, and check their progress and to solve problems. If meetings were unprocedurally or indecisively handled, it could discourage participation of SGB members. It was therefore imperative that meetings were well organized and properly chaired. Some of the types of meetings held are: Ordinary meetings, Urgent meeting, Extra-ordinary meetings and Annual general meetings.

A meeting that is well prepared and presented is a good meeting irrespective of the type of meeting. The chairperson has to have a clear understanding of the procedure involved in conducting meetings. Illustrated below is a guide to the SGB in the procedure of conducting meetings.

**Table 1** A guide to the preparation of a SGB meeting.

| Agenda | Explanation |
|---|---|
| 1. The title of meeting. | For example: Quarterly Meeting of the SGB of Bongimfundo Primary Farm School. |
| 2. Venue, day, date and time. | School Hall, Saturday, 20 September 2008, 3 pm. |
| 3. Present-Attendance. | List all those who are present at the meeting. |
| 4. Apologies. | Record all written or verbal apologies. Do not include those who did not sent any apology. |
| 5. Minutes of the previous meeting. | The minutes of the previous meeting has to be read and formally accepted. If there are any mistakes, these must be corrected before formal acceptance. |
| 6. Matters arising from the minutes. | Matters that continue from the previous meeting, such as tasks that had to be done or issues that needed further investigation. |
| 7. Items for discussion. | A list of things that need to be discussed at the meeting, for example: School uniform. Excursion. Report from staff. Financial report etc. |
| 8. General. | Any other issues that anyone wishes to be discussed. These could be listed at the beginning of the meeting but people can still add at a later stage. |
| 9. Next meeting. | The meeting should agree about the date, time and venue of the next meeting, so that people may consider this in their planning. |

*School policies*

Policies are guidelines for action in the day-to-day running of a school. They are based on principles and values and are guided by legislation. Having a policy helps you to be consistent and fair in dealing with issues. Policies pertaining to the governance of the school are the responsibility of the SGB. In terms of SASA, (1996) the SGB has to have in place certain compulsory policies. They are listed below:

- The SGB Constitution: A constitution is a document that explains how an organization must be run. It is a set of rules and regulations. It also has to include the values and principles of the organization. A SGB's constitution forms the basis for all the governing body's work.

- Vision and Mission statement: A vision is the goal (for the learners of the school) that the SGB wants to create. It shows where you want to go and how you would like to be when you get there. The mission is the written description of how you expect to achieve your vision.

- Code of conduct for learners: A code of conduct is a set of practices that guides the behavior of the learners and their conduct at the school. A code of conduct should be developed with the whole school community since it needs the support of everyone in the school community.

- Admission policy: The SGB must formulate and write the admission policy of the school. The admission policy may not conflict with SASA or any applicable laws in a particular province. The SGB is mandated to admit learners from the first school day of the year in which the learner reaches the age of seven until the last school day in which the learner reaches the age of fifteen or the ninth grade.

- Language policy: SASA states that the SGB may choose the language to be used for teaching and learning. In deciding the language policy, the SGB must comply with the Constitution, SASA and the relevant provincial laws.

- Religious policy: the SGB may lay down rules for religious observances at the school. The implication of this is that the SGB may choose to hold or not to hold religious observances. Religious observances are regular events like school-opening ceremonies, scripture reading, prayer and religious singing. The constitutional rights of all learners and staff must be respected. If the school is a section 14 school that belongs to a religious organization, that organization may demand that the type of religion practiced at the school be continued.

All policies drawn up by the SGB must be within the ambits of the Constitution and in line with the relevant legislations. They must comply with the principles of consultation, accountability, transparency and fairness. The role of Farm school SGBs in policy formulation is no doubt problematic and challenging considering that most of the members are either illiterate or semi-literate. Studies carried out by Sayed, (2002) confirmed that many schools did not have their own

drafted policies but rather they depended on departmental policies or existing documents for guidance. Possible reasons for this dependency may be the lack of capacity on the part of the SGB or the lack of training on the part of the Department of Education. Nevertheless policies properly formulated, contributed to the effective governance of schools.

The Report of the Ministerial Review Committee (2004) concluded that the recipe for success of an SGB and its school lies in "meeting its policy commitments and objectives in key-areas of its educational life" (2004: 139). It also advised that SGBs have to be assisted towards developing their capacity to promote the kind of governance that will turn schools into healthy and productive learning environments.

*The role of the farm school principal on the SGB*

The South African Government Gazette No. 19767 of February 1999 (1999:12-13) and the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 fully explains the duties of the school principal. SASA (1996) states that the principal is an *ex-officio* member of the SGB. The Personnel Administrative Measures document further specifies the responsibilities for the principal in relation to the SGB. They are as follows:

- To serve on the SGB of the school and render all necessary assistance to the SGB in the performance of their functions in terms of SASA.
- To co-operate with the members of the school staff and the SGB in maintaining an efficient and smooth running school.

Included in the above duties, is the principal's responsibility to train the SGB members. Some principals empowered SGB members by holding workshops and providing handouts. However on farm schools, the major challenge for principals was having members who were not fluent in the English language.

*The role of the farm owner on the SGB*

The farm owner is a co-opted member of the SGB and as such had no voting rights. He must be involved with all decisions taken by the SGB. Besides the general functions of the SGB, the farm owner's responsibilities are outlined in the contractual agreement signed between him and the Provincial Member of the Executive Council for education in accordance with Regulations set

out in December 1977 and as stipulated in SASA (1996). The terms and agreement are outlined in the section – Creeping towards Section 14 (above).

However, many farm owners showed no interest in school related activities. The possible reason may be that there was no commitment on the part of the farmer or that there may be issues or concerns between the school and the farmer or that they relied heavily on the principal.

## **Methodology**

This study was conducted by means of a qualitative case study methodology.

*Case Study*

Mouton (2007: 281-282) explained that the origins of the case study approach were unclear. Some researchers have traced it back to Bronislaw Malinowski in anthropology and Frederic Le Play in French sociology, while others have nominated the members of the Chicago School in North American Sociology as the real pioneers in the use of case study methods. According to Feagin, (1991), case study was the ideal methodology when an in-depth investigation was needed. Stake (1995) further emphasized that the sole criterion for selecting a case study should be an opportunity to learn.

However, according to Leedy (2005:135), in a case study, a particular individual, program or event was studied in depth for a defined period of time. Researchers could focus on a single case or two or more cases. If two or more cases were studied, it might be for comparison purposes or to build theory or propose generalizations.  This study has used two-farm school SGBs as case studies to propose generalization.

Babbie and Mouton, (2007) pointed out that often case study researchers have a limited knowledge prior to the conducting of the actual research.  I therefore carried out a documentary study before the actual focus group interviews were conducted.  The documentary study had pre-determined the current state of the SGB in terms of their capacity to execute their functions.

Yin (1994) had identified some specific types of case studies: *Exploratory, Explanatory,* and *Descriptive.* Exploratory case studies were sometimes considered as a prelude to social research.

Explanatory case studies were used for doing casual investigations. Descriptive case studies required a descriptive theory to be developed before starting an investigation.

Case studies have their limitations. There might be problems with the validity of information. Casual links were difficult to test and generalizations from single cases could not be made. Therefore triangulation was of significance since it helped in validation.

**Multiple sources of data**

In order to get the maximum understanding with tangible evidence, I first undertook a document study. The document study was followed by a structured interview with a focus group.

*Document Study:*

My first step was to analyze data from the contents of the SGB minutes. Minutes are categorized as non-personal documents. Non-personal documents, according to Bailey, (1994:294) "imply documents that are compiled and maintained on a continuous basis by an organization". Minutes from the current term of office that commenced in 2006 were analyzed. The minutes gave me a clear indication of what actually transpired at meetings. Data was then captured and categorized into broad themes. I selected the following broad themes that were relevant to my research:

- Formulation of Policies
- Providing support for quality education
- Training
- General challenges

The advantage of document study was that there was no cost involved in obtaining them. A further advantage of the document study was that the producers of the document did "not anticipate the analysis of the document" (De Vos, 2005:318). In this research the document study was validated by the focus group interviews. Patton (2002:306) explains the purpose of triangulation as "the strengths of one procedure can compensate for the weakness of another approach".

Document study also has its disadvantages. Often when documents are requested, they simply may not be available because records were never kept. In cases, even if they were available, requests may be refused.

My concern about the study of the SGB minutes was the medium of the written language. However this was not the case. All the minutes were legibly written in English by the secretary who was the educator representative on the SGB.

*Structured Interviews*

This study used the structured interview method in a focus group. There were many advantages to the interview method. According to Cohen, (1994) the interview allowed for a greater depth of data collection than other methods. Unlike other methods, interviews were characterized by their adaptability (Bell, 1987: 70). They allowed for clarifying questions, following up of ideas, probing responses and investigating motives and feelings and provided more complete information. Non-verbal cues such as facial expression, tone of voice, hesitation and other crucial forms of body language provided information, which a written response would conceal. However I was equally aware of the limitations of the interview method: it was time consuming and prone to subjectivity. With regards to subjectivity, Merton, (1990: xxi) cautioned us that, the focus group interview could be "misused in that, plausible interpretations (that) are taken from group interviews and are treated as being reliably valid".

*The focus group*

Various attempts to define a focus group interview were made by researchers (see Stewart, 1990:10; Denzin & Lincoln, 1994:365; Kreuger, 1998:26). I concurred with Denzin and Lincoln4:365) when they stated that the focus group interview was, "essentially a qualitative data gathering technique that finds the interviewer… directing (the interviewee) the interaction and inquiry in a very structured or unstructured manner, depending on the interview's purpose". The reason for choosing focus group interviews together with a document study was to gain an in-depth understanding on the capacity and challenges that are affecting the functioning of the farm school SGB.

The purpose of the focus group was therefore, "to promote self-disclosure among participants and to increase objectivity. It is to know what people really think and feel," (Krueger and Casey, 2000:7). Focus groups examined shared feelings about a given topic. The focus group suited my research since it validated data collected from the document study.

Focus groups created a process of sharing and comparing among participants. What was unique about this focus group was that they probably shared and experienced the same concerns and or challenges. All the participants were farm school SGB members duly assisted by their principals because of the presumed low level of literacy. For the purposes of validation and transparency, the focus group comprised of any three members of the SGB. Two-farm school SGBs were invited to participate in the focus group. Differences in gender, race, age and number of years of experiences as SGB members and levels of literacy were not taken into consideration. Respondents were required to share their functioning experiences in their respective schools. When there was a need for clarity, probing questions were posed to the respondents so that there was a clear understanding amongst all participants. Terms or words that created ambiguity or uncertainty were explained to the respondents.

Merton (1990) suggested that "the size of the group… should not be so large…nor should it be so small that it fails to provide substantially greater coverage than that of an interview with one individual" (1990:137). Two-farm school SGBs from the Ilembe District, Kwa-Zulu Natal, formed the focus group. They were informed using the normal channels of communication through the Circuit office. The selected SGBs each received an invitation outlining the purpose of the interaction. All the necessary details were provided together with confirmation and meeting details.

An interview schedule was prepared and piloted with one other farm school SGB outside the sample of this research in order to detect any shortcomings in its structure. Questions and responses of the pilot study were examined and rephrasing for clarity or understanding was done. Open-ended questions were included to give the respondents an opportunity to provide additional comments or further substantiation.

Qualitative research aimed to generate theories from data that emerge. This research was designed to be exploratory and descriptive, in understanding the capacity and challenges experienced by farm school SGBs in the execution of their duties. Therefore the case study was the ideal approach for gaining this understanding.

## Sampling

For validation and objectivity, a minimum of three members per SGB were invited. Two farm schools had been selected to make up the focus group. This created a platform for an objective understanding between the SGB members. Learners were not included since they did not form a part of the SGB in primary schools. Each school was requested to bring along their contractual agreement.

## Data Collection

An interview schedule was prepared for the participants for the process of data collection. Responses were audio taped. The services of an interpreter were required at both schools. The responses were then transcribed. The interviews were conducted at the respective schools at a time that was determined by the SGB members. Consent was obtained before the actual interviews commenced.

Data was analyzed according to each research question. I looked for themes and patterns from the responses. Emphasis was placed on commonness of the responses. Similar patterns were then grouped transforming them into research findings. These findings were used in constructing a framework for communicating the essence of the data collected. Recommendations based from these findings were then made. The reporting has been done using Yin's design, as described earlier.

## Data Analysis

The purpose of this research was to perform an in-depth descriptive case study to gain a deeper understanding of the capacity and challenges facing the SGB of farm schools and how these impact on their roles and responsibilities.

Of the various roles and responsibilities, the document study and the focus group interview concentrated on the capacity level of the members in the formulation of school policies, the training received, the support provided by the SGB to principal and staff, and general challenges experienced at farm schools. The document study served to validate the contents of the interviews. Generally the themes emerging from both the document study and the interviews coincided with Motimele (2005) conclusion that "some of the SGBs are not working properly

because they do not have the necessary skills and are not sure about their roles and responsibilities" (Education Rights Project,2004). The Ministerial Review committee (2004,117) further confirms that there "are clear instances where the SGBs are not meeting the requirements of functionality".

The farm school SGB members were happy to be a part of the SGB. Respondents from both schools concurred that they were proud to be members of the SGB.  It afforded them a status in the community as one respondent from school A remarked that, "parents come to us to find out about the school".

*The competency level of the SGB in the formulation of policies*
The most important policy development areas to which the SGB should pay attention are: access and admission, school fees, appointments and transfers, language and indemnity and extra-curricular activities. The Department of Education requires schools to develop their own policies for HIV/AIDS. Both schools in this study did not speak of or could show evidence of having such a policy even in the document study.

On the question of policy formulation one respondent from school A assumed the word policy for "police". The term policy and its implications had to be explained in IsiZulu before I could proceed with the interviews. Arising from this misinterpretation, I arrived at two conclusions. Firstly, some members were presumably ignorant about school policies because of a lack of training.  Secondly, it presented a challenge to me in that, had the interviews been conducted in IsiZulu, the responses would probably have been different. Nevertheless both school SGBs (after given explanations) realized the need for school policies but were totally reliant     on the principal and staff to draw up policies.

The principal of school B attempted to capacitate the SGB on the vision and mission of the school but the SGB chose to accept it as it is without any amendments. The principal went on further to explain the roles and responsibilities of the SGB. Handouts, which were given to members, were placed in files.   This, to me, was a fruitless   exercise since they relied heavily on the principal and staff to formulate policies. As one educator representative from school A explained:

> *"The level of education around the parents here is very poor, so they cannot even, like participate in terms of drawing or drafting policies. So it is up to the educators to draft*

*the policies and then inform the SGB. It can take some time to explain so that they can have some understanding of the policy".*

Another respondent from school A said:

*"Our part in drawing up school policy is involvement. It is just that we are always around. We discuss with the teachers whatever needs to be done at school. We are here so that nothing happens at school without our knowledge".*

Another respondent from school B explained that "*she can't explain how policies are being formed because they have never been trained on how to form policies".* Training of the SGBs is the responsibility of the Department of Education as mandated in SASA (Section 19). It is clearly evident that training by the principal is either not done or even if it is done, it is inadequate.

From the above discussion, it would appear that the SGBs have very little or no knowledge on the effect that policies have on school governance. Producing documentary proof of filed policies does not constitute functionality. There was no evidence of capacity building programmes in the documentary studies. Both school acknowledged the need for training in policy formulation, however no steps were taken to remedy it. There was also no evidence of requests from the SGB for capacity building workshops.

Functionality should, however, imply more than mere paper work or holding meetings at least once a term. School B had to postpone its meeting twice in one term because of a lack of quorum. This brought apathy as an issue amongst parents. It appears that non-attendance or poor attendance at meetings and low levels of participation is still prevalent at farm schools. Perhaps the SGB members regard holding of meetings more important than actually governing schools by way of implementing school policies.

SASA (1996: Section 20(1)), stipulates that the "SGB of a school must promote the best interest of the school". It is therefore my view that despite the best intentions of the SGB, they are focusing too mush of their energies on administrative issues and very little attention to the kind of policies that would contribute to the building of a learning environment.

*Training of SGBs*

The need for training seems to be a "cry" from the SGB members.  All respondents agreed that training is absolutely necessary especially in the drawing up of school policies. As one respondent from school B said:

> *"We need training, because especially in drawing up of policies because we have to be accountable-because if we are trained and are well informed we will be able to account but if we are not trained we will not be able to account for the responsibility of what is taking place in our school. So training is really needed".*

All respondents agreed that there was no training provided for the SGB to perform their roles and responsibilities.  They seem to have no knowledge on what the training actually was so it was difficult to determine for how long the training should take place. On respondent from school A suggested that training should be continuous for a minimum period of three days.

Of great concern is the level of literacy amongst the members. On member is a part of the Masafundasane Campaign for Literacy. She is learning the basics of English. However this is insufficient to assist her because she is still unable to read.

Training especially on fund raising is a dire need for all SGB members. Members simply have no skills in fund raising and are therefore unable to fund the school. The training here specifically refers to skills required to get outside financial help because they are unable to fund raise within their community because of the high levels of poverty. Even those who are working (as labourers on the farm) find it difficult to cope with the high cost of living.

One educator representative from school B suggested that the SGB needs to be trained in other skills like knitting so that they are able to assist themselves and other parents to be self-employed. Training to capacitate the SGB to carry out their roles and responsibilities will, if properly executed, will enhance their capacity.

Training provides skills for capacity building. This lack of capacity weakens the effective functioning of the SGBs. I have come to the conclusion that the SGB's incapacity is due to high levels of illiteracy, limited proficiency in English or very little formal education. Generally SGB members are still chosen on account of their popularity in the farming community and not on the basis of their technical or professional skills.

*Support provided to principal and staff*

The data does not reveal the extent to which the SGB provides support to the principal and staff. However from the interviews it appears that the SGB members were willing to assist the principal and staff wherever and whenever they were able to. Limited assistance was provided owing to financial constraints as well as low levels of literacy.

Both school SGBs assisted whenever the school had a function. For example if the school was organizing an Awards Day, the SGB members assisted with routine chores. One respondent from school A mentioned that she *"even skips her days at work and the farm owner won't pay them but they do it for the school"*.

Both schools' SGB members accompanied the school on educational trips arranged by the school. They assisted in the welfare and discipline of learners.

One respondent from school B reported that they took care of the school property during the weekend as well as during the holidays. Farm schools had no security personnel and schools are exposed to vandalism. So as the SGB made sure that the school was safe. They even attended to the watering of the school gardens during the holidays.

While it was true that there were distinct differences among SGBs in different communities, farm communities could not provide the necessary support as their counterparts in urban communities. The farm school SGBs was under-capacitated and were not effective at fundraising. There was no data reflecting any attempt by the SGB to generate funds to assist even in maintaining the school property.

To bring governance capacity to farm school SGBs is not an easy task because of the immense educational backlog that parents themselves have. To ask of them to engage at the educator's level is a definite no. Even data from both document studies revealed that all the meetings were chaired by the principal and recorded by the educator representative.

From the above discussion it can be safely concluded that parents are willing to assist the principal and staff but there are limitations as well as challenges in providing support.

*General Challenges*

The fact that parents of both farm school communities were not functionally literate, created challenges in the execution of their responsibilities. This study concurred with Motimele, (2005), who also concluded that "some of the SGBs are not working properly because they do not have the necessary skills," and "are not sure about their roles and responsibilities". However both schools' SGBs declared their commitment towards school governance, but their efforts were hindered by conditions beyond their control.

One of the greatest concerns of the farm school SGB was that of Safety and Security. One respondent from school B stated that, "*often girls come running home because criminals on the road want to rape them".* At school A, a worker living on the school premises was gang raped. The SGB member of school B actually accompanied children half way to and from school because of criminals lurking in the sugar-cane fields. Vandalism occurred on a weekly basis. School B was broken into twice this year and it had a burglary every year as soon as the Department of Education supplied the school with labour saving devices. School A had their gates locked continuously because if the educators were in class, they were unable to  see who was entering the school property.

The second major concern was that of transport. Even if there was public transport, parents could not afford to pay because of the high levels of unemployment and poverty. Learners had to walk long distances and often came late to school. Coming late to school disturbed the culture of teaching and learning. Furthermore the lack of transport saw many   children of school going age, not attending school. This resulted in the problem of having higher aged children in lower classes.   Inclement weather also contributed to the high levels of absenteeism. On the contrary some learners braved the weather so that they could get the only meal for the day from the School Nutrition Programme at school.

Both schools explained the issue of seasonal workers. Seasonal workers worked when harvesting was done or when the mill was open. This situation was problematic because during the off-crop season, migrant workers went home taking their children along with them. Often some returned whilst others did not. This resulted in a decline of learner enrolment.

A decline in enrolment affected the teacher-pupil ratio and as a result grades had to be combined. Teaching combined grades was not a new concept to farm schools. It came with its own set of challenges. As one educator representative from school B complained that "*we can't cover all the syllabi. We are doing this to satisfy Management, whether the child learns or not is irrelevant. We will do a better job if we select what is important*". School A reaffirmed the educator's response by saying that, "*there is only so much the teachers can do*".

Because of the high level of illiteracy, sending circulars or requesting parents to come to school to review their children's progress or even signing the progress cards at the end of the term was a futile exercise. As a respondent from school A explained that when she attempted to assist her child at home, the child ran away knowing fully well that his mother could not read.

The maintenance of school physical infrastructure, including security, fell within the ambit of the responsibilities of the SGB. The SGB was given the authority to control school property, buildings and grounds occupied by the school (section 21(a) of SASA). However no mention of taking responsibility was mentioned during the interviews and no evidence in the document study was noted. However both schools complained about poor infrastructure. Upon careful probing it was discovered that there was no contractual agreement signed at school B. School B did not even know the farm owner. He had distanced himself because the learners ate his sugar cane.

From the data collected and analyzed, it can be safely concluded that farm schools SGBs experienced many challenges in school governance ranging from insufficient training, a lack of security, low funding, and combined grades to poor socio economic backgrounds.

*Recommendations: (Synthesis and generalization)*

When a SGB has been elected or when new members join, it is important for members to get to know each other so that they can work as a team. It is also important to get to know about the school, about the previous governing body and most important, about the documents that describe the laws related to school governance. Some of the documents relating to school governance include the Constitution (Act 108 of 1996), the National Education Policy Act (Act 27 of 1996), the Labour Relations Act (Act 66 of 1995), the Educators Employment Act (Proclamation 138 of 1994) and the South African Schools Act (No. 84 of 1996).

Governance is hard work and there is so much knowledge and skills required to perform effectively. All members of the SGB have to make a meaningful contribution so that decisions around goals and policies are shared and owned by the school community. One way of sharing work is to form committees to do special tasks. For example, but not limited to, a Discipline, Safety and Security committee, a Finance committee, an Interviews committee, a Policy Development committee, a Curriculum committee, a Recreation and Culture committee and an Award's day committee. These committees have no authority to make binding decisions, but must make recommendations to the executive SGB members.

Because the SGB comprises of diverse parents, conflicting situations may arise. It is a major challenge for SGBs to find ways of working together or else the main purpose (of improving the quality of education in the school) will not be reached. It is therefore necessary for members of the SGB to trust and respect each other and resolve conflicts in a positive way.

Irrespective of the type of school, the SGB is mandated by SASA to perform its functions. However, according to the Ministerial Review Committee on farm schools, there "are clear instances where the SGBs are not meeting the requirements of functionality" (2004,117). To compound this problem, majority of the decisions were made by the principal and staff. It is therefore imperative for parents to take their own initiative to become literate not only for playing a meaningful role on the SGB but even as parents, to support their children.

Therefore after systhesing the data, I am convinced that proper Training will form the foundation for those committed SGBs who wish to carry out their functions effectively. It is proposed that the Department of Education hold a week long workshop to capacitate all farm school SGBs once elected. This workshop should include but not restricted to the following:
- A generic format for drawing up of policies.
- Practical guidelines on the procedures in the actual drawing up of policies, the implementation, monitoring and evaluation of policies.
- The workshop should include a competency level assessment with incentives at the end of the workshop.
- Ongoing support by a special task team for all farm school SGBs.

- A cluster concept of farm school SGB be institutionalized so that the practice of co-operative planning concerning key areas of functionality are shared and discussed.
- To offer measures to educate the whole parent community on governance issues.

On the question of providing support, once the SGB is adequately trained they will intrinsically provide support to the school. However many of the challenges requires immediate attention. These challenges, namely: violence and vandalism and resource shortages, (human, infrastructural and consumables) are beyond the control of the SGBs. The Department of Education is strongly advised to identify all farm schools, and develop and implement some kind of emergency plan

## Conclusion

There is very strong evidence of insufficient understanding of the role of the SGB in making the school a deep learning organization. Considering where the broad mass of South African parents come from, school governance is still finding its feet in practice. There is a need for the SGB to move beyond the form of position and to invest in the field of school governance. The cry now is for governors to develop a better understanding of what they have to do by way of roles and responsibilities.

The reality on farm schools is that they are under-capacitated and not sufficiently effective in engaging with the business of providing support to teaching and learning. The challenges are beyond their control and the Department of Education has to step in order to capacitate the SGB to be effective and efficient. It is abundantly clear that, in farm schools, management and governance plans are worked out by the principal and staff and are brought to the SGB for ratification

Substantial as the challenges on farm school are, it must be emphasized that there are many ways in which the challenges can be confronted. The National Department of Education has an enormous task of developing the framework for short, medium and long-term objectives for governance practice on farm schools in South Africa.

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