IS THE SCHOOL A PLAYGROUND FOR POLITICS?

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Abstract

South African public schools' capacity to govern themselves is an enduring concern of academic inquiry within the social sciences. Yet, the framing of this concern into an imagery where the state's political agenda is directly related to its ability to draw upon, influence and withdraw the self-governing capacities of communities in relation to public school governance is more recent.

1   INTRODUCTION

If democracy in South Africa is to remain stable, the ANC led government must be able to make credible commitments to its voters, that is, it must make promises on which it cannot renege. Failing to do so means that citizens will forever be aware of the fact that the state can take back what it has given, and it will be unlikely to settle, perpetuating conflict. When the schools act (Act 84 of 1996) was originally actioned, the school governing body (SGB) had the power to select the principal of their choice but when the ANC were not satisfied with some of the choices, made by certain SGBs (especially in the former white schools) they rapidly amended the Act removing this power from the SGB and giving it to the Head Of Department (Provincial).There is an inextricable relationship between politics, democracy, education and school governance.

1.1   Problem statement, and concept clarification

Political power has allowed the South African Democratic Union (SADTU) influence over public school governance in South Africa. This article focusses on how and why SADTU has imposed political pressure on school governance.

1.1.1 Defining Politics

Politics is a term for describing different ideologically or interest based political strategies in the South African context, a form of social capitalism is practised which demands a battle for power within social institutions established through a representative democracy [1]. A principal in a public school realises that he/she has the right a Democratic society to hold his/her own opinions, make his/her own decisions and be treated as an equal. However as a civil servant he/she is denied these rights and one is expected to do what is instructed without question and submit to the will of the HOD [2]. The school as an organisation is thus inherently political. The manifold problems, theories and moral values which inform politics inevitably leads to conflict. We have chosen this rather broad definition of politics to be able to capture some of the many ways in which the reflections, ambitions and struggles over school-governance transcend traditional social-relationship boundaries because of a political ideology [1].

This definition of politics allows us to map some of the manifold ways in which the public school governance imagery is abused and manipulated by bureaucrats and a union to further their own agenda. School is not just about knowledge and skills, but also about values, attitudes and creative and emotional development, all of which contribute to "responsible, active and productive citizenship"[2].

1.1.2 Aim and Objectives

Our objectives in this article are to:

investigate how and why politics undermines the decision making power of the School Governing Body (SGB).

explore the pressure the South African Democratic Union (SADTU) imposes on school governance and reveal the influence this has on the functioning of the school.

2   THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

Critical theory elucidates power as the strategy to persuade another to act contrary to the latter's interests, or shape the interests of the opposition so that they are no longer in conflict. Power is therefore the ability to change the perceptions and preferences of the opposition so that they comply with the dominant actor; here conflict is latent [3]. The true interests of the dominated are excluded because the dominated do not express them or believe it is in their best interest to comply with the dominant. Regardless of whether actors use direct authority, or manipulation, the "use" of power has two requirements. First, an actor must have resources that are valuable to another. Second, an actor must have the ability and desire to strategically leverage those resources in order to direct, constrain, or manipulate another [4].

The State's quest for control over public school governance is embodied in the power of the protestors (SADTU members), who use their very bodies to challenge the social order by disrupting daily school life, and thus, the status quo in schools. They harness the technological power of social media to build and sustain their movement, and they benefit from the ideological power of major media outlets, which share their views with the global audience [5]. The embodied and mediated, ideological power of the protestors which is reflective of the African National Congress's (ANC) ideology of transformation and affirmative action, turns into political power by exerting pressure (since the ANC has a two-thirds majority) in the South African parliament; to meet the protestors' demands and amend legislation as has been done to the South African South Act (SASA). Dahrendorf [6] claims that "the important difference between power and authority, consists in the fact that, whereas power is essentially tied to the personality of individuals, authority is always associated with social positions or roles." The ANC assumes authority over school governance, precisely because of its stature in parliament [6]. Therefore, while people have political equality, they lack social equality [6]. This unresolved contradiction is relatively permanent and a major source of conflict. Conflict does not emanate from any individual's authority, but from the position of the group; which resonates the authority displayed by SADTU and Education bureaucrats under the auspices of the ANC-State [6].

2.1   Background:

The state (which is the ANC in alliance with the Communist party and COSATU) has to maintain voter confidence [7]. It is one of the researcher's opinion, from personal experience as a principal from 1997 to 2005 that Equity in schools, like in any organisation in South Africa, had to be achieved, since it was an election promise made by the African National Congress in the 1994 election campaign, [7] "Developing states have become politically answerable through periodic elections" writes Heller. The process of transformation, was not progressing as desired by the Tri-partite alliance, in certain schools, since it appeared that the SGB of these schools were not appointing candidates of black African descent. This did not only happen in as previously labelled "Indian", "Coloured", and "White" schools, but also in some "African" schools. The State then removed the power of the SGB to recommend the applicant of its choosing. The SGB's power to appoint school personnel was replaced with a policy where the SGB could only recommend the three most successful candidates in the interview, for a teaching and a promotion post. In most cases where these were not of black African decent, candidates that were ranked sixth to tenth were selected. Robbins, [8] refers to this as Coercive Power; "where the state uses its legal resources to intimidate its citizens". Only a small number of SGBs frustrated by the loss of their right to appoint school personnel, chose to challenge the States' decision to remove this right.

The issue of redress and equity is dependent on the SGBs' theory of action, since SGBs decision making power over finance, the plant, key internal policies and appointing teachers of their choice, would in effect compel them to put State policies into practice and this then must: *reverse past injustices in educational provision…..advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance and promote their acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the State* [9].

School governance is increasingly being regarded as a complex process of co-governance, involving a plurality of relevant and affected school communities, school role-players and State education departments in carrying out various governance tasks through a form of self-governance. This new imagery is embedded in a variety of, often contradictory, governing activities carried out under such headings as participatory planning and active education policies. While these diverse activities cannot in any way be reduced to one and the same phenomenon, they all, in one way or another, hold the promise of being more effective, efficient and or democratic, by latching on to the self-governing capacities of individuals and collectives. In that sense, they all inscribe themselves in a governance imagery that we denote the politics of self-governance [10].

Adams and Waghid [11] view participation, community engagement, rationality, consensus, equality and freedom as the constitutive principles of the South African democracy, when distributed school governance or self-governance was conceived of in 1996. However the nature of distributed governance in schools has changed from its initiation in 1996, particularly at the micro (school) level. This current version of shared school governance (which is synonymous with distributed governance) has implications for democracy in South Africa. Froneman, [12] regarded democracy as a disputed term, because the totalitarian countries described their forms of government as democracies or people's republics. Froneman [12] reveals that in South Africa attitudes to democracy, society, law and the Constitution are deeply contested, not only in white but also in black society. Steyn [13] explains that the term "democracy" includes the model of social democracy, which describes South Africa. Social democracy aims to achieve equality by means of state control. Equality in democratic theory refers to political and moral equality, equal treatment by public administration, equality before the law, equal opportunities, equal respect as a human being and equal consideration for the different needs of individuals and communities. Equality does not entail that the state should enforce uniformity or absolute similarity on its citizenry. Selected democrats of the Schumpeterian School [14] regarded unprecedented public participation as a peril to democracy, because the efficiency of government and effectiveness of the state may be adversely affected. Pateman [15] a participatory democrat himself, specifically, proposed ways to democratise workplaces, the family, media, neighborhoods, schools, and decision-making on human relations in the natural environment. He maintained that all these sites comprise 'political systems' in a general sense, which are linked in some way with the state, as they depict places where policy decisions, are made based on power relations and they are thus subject to democratisation [16].

2.1.1 Context

The frustration experienced by SGBs, through SADTU's negative stance, which goes unnoticed by the state, flies in the face of SASA's objective of developing a relationship between parents, schools and the state in governance, to ensure quality education as an important outcome of distributed school governance [17]. Collaboration between all the schools' role players was one of the most important intentions' of SASA. A key indicator of the importance of the SGB in this partnership is particularly because they are elected onto this school based "body" and represent the interests of the local community. However the South African Democratic Teachers Union's (SADTU) functionaries are chiefly responsible for the removal of SGBs decision making power within the school governance process. It follows that SGBs may well view what has happened since 1994 as a promise first fulfilled but later disappointed and frustrated [18].The (SADTU) members are aware of the power SADTU wields and become oblivious to normal rules of protocol and so exert a negative influence on school governance. A recent media report bears testimony to SADTU's power; reprobate members of teachers' union Sadtu have "captured" a key provincial education department, which officials in Basic Education Minister Angie Motshekga's office say is now on the "verge of collapse". [19].

2.1.2 SADTU's unfettered power.

SADTU's value in the Tri-partite Alliance is revealed in the positions they occupy which allow them great power. SADTU's former senior office bearers have gone on to become long-serving cabinet ministers and senior government officials in the post-apartheid democratic government. Membathisi Mdladlana rose to Minister of Labour when the ANC came to power in 1994 [20]. Mdladlana is the longest serving minister in South Africa's democratic government having served as labour minister during the presidencies of Nelson Mandela, Thabo Mbeki and Kgalema Motlanthe, who was acting president when Mbeki was recalled by the ANC in September 2008. Duncan Hindle, another former SADTU senior official joined the Department of Education in 1996 as chief director and was promoted to Director General in 2005. Thulas Nxesi a former SADTU Secretary General, became a Member of Parliament in 2009 [20]. He was appointed deputy minister of rural development and land reform in 2010 and subsequently promoted to minister of public service.

The (SADTU) is the largest teacher union in South Africa boasting 240 000 members, mostly of black African descent. This number constitutes more than 70% of educators in the whole of South Africa's teaching sector [20]. SADTU is a strategic political partner in the ANC-led ruling tripartite alliance by virtue of its affiliation to the Congress of South African Trade Unions (COSATU). The tripartite alliance represents the predominantly black and African political constituency, which now constitutes an unquestionable majority in the South African parliament. It is this majority that votes bills into laws and discussion documents into national policies.

SADTU makes it almost impossible for the State to sack in-competent teachers. [21].Indeed comrade "politicians have repeatedly given in, surreptitiously to SADTU's demands for permanency and promotions for its members" [21]. Politicians ignore reports that SADTU acts as a disruptive element in schools in order to avoid tension and protracted labour disputes.

SADTU's political position has grim implications for appointments to key strategic posts in schools. In their Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) study on retention and attrition of teachers in the North West Province Diko and Letseka [22] report on abuses of the recruitment and promotion processes for post levels 2 (head of department) and post level 3 (deputy principal) by teacher unions, especially SADTU and union-aligned local education officials. This often manifests in behind-the-scenes influence by SADTU's leaders for their preferred candidates. Interview questions for such posts are supposed to be guardedd by secrecy by the District Education Office and by law, unions are supposed to only serve as observers during the interview process. Diko and Letseka [22] also report on routine and opportune leaking of confidential details to SADTU's chosen candidates to enable them to have an unfair advantage in the interview.

SADTU achieves its dubious ends through mobilizing its members to go on strike over salary increases. The signature of these strikes are violent attacks on those that are perceived to be dissenters or scabs. Fleisch [23] argues that SADTU members are willing to use intimidation and threats as tactics with the department's officials and schools, and SADTU radicals assume *de facto* authority in relation to departmental functions such as district officials' work and disciplinary action against schools that bar learners from writing examinations. SADTU strikes and protest marches have now become clichéd as strike season and are often carried out with total disregard for their impact on teaching and learning [24]. In 2000 the National Policy on Whole School Evaluation (WSE) was introduced to monitor and evaluate the performance of the schools and the teachers [25]. The WSE was designed "to establish standardized instruments and procedures for monitoring school performance and establishing the support needs of schools" [26]. WSE was meant to be supportive and developmental rather than punitive and judgmental. It was not intended to be used as a coercive tool, but would ensure that policies are compatible with it. It promised to facilitate support and improvement of school performance using approaches of partnerships, collaboration, mentoring and guidance. Regardless of all these assurances SADTU pursued a bitter battle to prevent such testing to prevent its members from being evaluated, some of whom have in fact been described as "scoundrels" [27]. In 2003 the East Rand Gauteng branch of SADTU refused WSE, in their schools [28].When the June 2009 Soweto Branch of SADTU "strike action

came to an end, hundreds of teachers had missed a number of weeks of work, thousands of school children, including learners in the final years of secondary school, had missed their mid-year examinations, and a number of principals and teachers had been assaulted and intimidated" [23].

On 18 August 2010 SADTU embarked on a full scale "in-definite strike" over salaries. The union demanded an 8.6% salary adjustment, R1000 housing allowance, and parity of medical aid (SADTU media statement, 17 August 2010). The result of this strike was a total shut down of schools until 6 September 2010 when it was eventually suspended. Grade 12 (matric) examinations were due to start on 26 October 2010. Bloch [29] notes a tendency for relations with teacher unions to be conflict-based "labour relations" rather than processes.

The frustration experienced by SGBs through SADTUs negative stance which goes unnoticed by the state, flies in the face of SASA's(SA, 1996) objective of developing a relationship between parents, schools and the state in governance, to ensure quality education as an important outcome of distributed school governance[30]. Collaboration between all the schools' role players was one of the most important intentions' of SASA.

3   THE RESEARCH DESIGN

Most of the data in this research was obtained for by using a qualitative approach. The qualitative analysis was supported by the results obtained from the quantitative interpretation of some of the items in the questionnaire. Some of the items in Section A served as independent variables and all the closed questions from Section B and C which were formulated in terms of scaled intervals served as dependent variables. They were analysed using quantitative techniques via SPSS 21.0. With respect to the qualitative collection of data, one-on-one and focus group interviews were conducted with role-players involved in school governance in six schools from various school districts in the South and East of Gauteng a province in S.A. The guiding criterion employed in selecting the schools for this study was not whether they represent the totality of schools in South Africa or even in one province, but rather that they make up a volume of types of schools in the South and East of Gauteng that comprise the collective case study. They were selected as they are scattered along a range of criteria, including level of resources according to the DoE's quintile ranking where schools are divided into national quintiles and funded based on the relative wealth of the surrounding community (SA, 1998). Coupled with these quintile criteria the schools are differently positioned in respect of school governance and other educational reforms and influence exerted by unions. The two broad types of schools are target and better-positioned schools. This study has coined these terms and classify the two chosen types of schools as a target school, as one that has a low level of resources (financial as well as physical, human, social and capital resources) and the school population hail from households where income levels are relatively low. A better positioned school is one with a measurably higher level of resources, parental education levels are higher and household income is higher. The schools ranking in terms of the National Norms and Standards for School Funding (SA, 1998)[31] was the basis to determine the relative income of the school and surrounding community. The NNSSF (SA, 1998) regulations are compiled by every province supplying a resource list, which ranks schools in the province in terms of the "condition of the school and the relative poverty of the school community" A key consideration in the choice of schools was choosing two "no-fee" schools (target schools) because by declaring a school "no-fee" school, the State impacts on a key decision making function of the SGB because this function is re-centralised. Choosing a better positioned or markedly better resourced school should reveal major differences in perceptions about governance.

3.1   Analysis of the qualitative findings

Data was gathered from a series of focus group and one-on-one interviews with members of six SGBs. The findings emanating from the data were categorised under the following themes (table 1).

TABLE 1: ANALYSIS OF QUALITATIVE DATA

Theme	Evidence from Interviews with SGBs
Capable of controlling the whole school through strength of numbers	*"I don't think Unions are supportive, when they go there just to check for their member. According to my own observation the unions are supportive somehow a bit more observant when it comes to the law that affects their members. The big union would champion its members' cause by dictating the way working conditions should be. Okay, the unions I know, are supportive of staffing in a negative way. There are times when they over-play their role".*

In order to reveal the rationale behind the themes arrived at they are now discussed: Capable of controlling the whole school through strength of numbers: The findings from the interviews indicate that the dominant teachers' union, namely the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) plays a vociferous and disruptive role in many of the schools. In the words of an experienced SGB chairperson and an ex-ANC office bearer: "I find unions particularly SADTU very undermining; they undermine the authority of the principal, they ignore the authority of the SGBs and they basically hold educators and the Department to ransom because they agitate and intimidate. They use vile language and brute force, if they have members that they feel were not treated fairly they won't approach the situation from a balanced point of view, they would just take their members word for it and then attack authority. In my experience as SGB chairperson for seven years, I found SADTU in the main undermining Education. SADTU, yes is a political organisation it was a voice for the workers like National Union of Mineworkers of South Africa (NUMSA). In the past they played a pivotal role in changing S.A around worker rights but now they have selfish motives for power for spaces, you often get appointments linked to their positions in the union and so they get senior appointments. So your head office personnel are confused whether they are shop stewards union members or officials and their roles become blurred. (Interview 12, Ln.763-780)

When a matter enjoys attention in the public domain then jurisprudence deems it as having legal capacity and to pose legal implications in the future:

City Press reported that "plum posts, including those of principal and deputy principal are being sold for upwards of R30000,00".A principal who preferred to remain anonymous for fear of reprisals said " When this thing started in the 1990s, they were demanding around R 11000 for a promotion post. Now it starts at R30000." [32]. P.Harper and S.Masondo verify the above responses in their article entitled:

3.1.1 FRAUDULENT BEHAVIOUR- HOW THE SCAM WORKS?

• A teacher who wants to land a promotion identifies the position

• Typically, this is a job that they know the incumbent will soon be leaving, either because they are retiring or because they are resigning from the department.

• That teacher then approaches a local Sadtu official who they know to be involved in selling positions for cash and hands over a minimum of R30000, 00.

If the post is filled, members on the school governing body are used to agitate against the incumbent if necessary to force them out of the post.

- The school governing body then recommends the teacher who paid for that job to the selection panel.

- The selection panel, which contains paid –off officials from the department, then ratifies the governing body's recommendation;

The teacher gets the job. (City Press 27 April 2014, accessed on 24 June 2014).

Zwelinzima Vavi Cosatu general secretary said "In November I wrote a letter to SADTU general secretary. Mugwena Maluleka asking him to investigate allegations that senior Sadtu officials were selling positions. But the investigation was not done" Vavi requested the investigation prior to the killing of the South coast principal, however M.Maluleka said an investigation was carried out and the officials were exonerated. The latter contended that the "allegations were part of a political campaign to discredit the union." In 2012 National Teacher's Union (Natu) protested in Durban about M.Mathonsi's supposed sale of a director position in the provincial education department. In Limpopo Ronald Moroatshehla, sent a list of six names to the Education MEC Dikeledi Magadzi insisting they be appointed to senior positions in circuit and district offices. The relevancy of the media reports to these findings, is that what respondents perceive about the relationship between Education structures, officials and SADTU's negative impact on schools is given credibility. City Press is in possession of the list which also contains the name of a relative of R.Moroatshehla. In the North West province, A. Thompson, Natu's deputy president confirms that they demanded former Natal premier Zweli Mkhize investigate the corruption around posts. The premier responded by appointing retired Judge Vuka Tshabalala to set up an enquiry in to the allegations against SADTU. However the enquiry "never got off the ground." Natu is in the process of appealing to the public protector- Thuli Madonsela to probe this matter.

The quantitative analysis of item C20 was overwhelmingly negative as 82.9% of the respondents indicated that they believed that the changes to SGB functions since 1996 had influenced the schools negatively. With respect to the role of teacher unions the quantitative analysis of C38 indicated that there were 77.1% respondents who answered "no" to the supportive role of teacher unions and only 22.9% who answered "yes". Respondents who answered no probably had personal experience with respect to the role that teacher unions play in teacher appointments and it appears to be largely negative. Ninety percent (90%) of the responses received in the interviews emphatically declared that the SADTU proved to be unconstructive. Taylor [33] argues that good schools are well organised institutions which nurture a strong work ethic, the ability to perform under pressure, and a sense of initiative and accountability; they educate learners, both in the way they function and in the values they embrace, that proficiency and principle, not patronage and corruption, is the route to sustainable success

4   CONCLUSION

The spiralling of school governance toward centralisation, has manifested in the current quality of education in South Africa, which is deeply worrying. This was disturbingly evident both from the 2001 Trends in International Mathematics and Science Study (TIMMS) and the 2006 Progress in International Reading Literacy Study (PIRLS), South Africa was placed last of all participating countries. The national average was dramatically lower than every other participating country, including, in different studies, Chile, the Philippines, Iran, and a range of other African states. Most disconcerting of all, the South African data reported a large standard deviation, suggesting an abnormally large range of quality in the answers received. It is not difficult to assume that this quality variation is associated with the profound structural inequalities in education governance, which undoubtedly has failed in its overarching purpose, namely, to provide children with a holistic education. The political activism by the dominant teachers' union (SADTU) has disrupted many schools by interfering with governance processes as expressed by

a chairperson, "I find unions particularly SADTU, very undermining, they undermine the authority of the principal and they ignore the authority of the SGB." Sadly these tensions are not being resolved by present practices because the present structures do not allay the challenges.

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