

The experience of and need for training of school governors in rural schools in South Africa

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The concept of decentralisation originates from the belief that the state cannot alone control schools, but should share its power with other stakeholders, particularly those closer to the school, on a partnership basis. The South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996) mandates the establishment of school governing bodies that allow stakeholders — such as the state, parents, educators and learners (in secondary schools) — to play an active role in taking decisions on behalf of the school. However, this can only happen if participants in school governance are trained to decide on matters affecting their schools. With this in mind, qualitative research was undertaken to determine what training school governing bodies had received in selected rural schools in the Free State and to what extent this had assisted them in fulfilling their tasks. Findings indicated perceptions of training and its effectiveness. Based on the findings, detailed recommendations for the improvement of practice are made.

Introduction

Although there are various reform initiatives, the major and specific feature of education reform agendas throughout the world has always been decentralising education governance to the local school level (Squelch, 2000:127). In South Africa decentralisation of schooling is a product of both historical development and the policy choices made by government since 1994 (Department of Education (DoE), 2004:38). The premise of decentralised school governance is to devolve more authority over education matters to local school communities (Levin, 1998:132). Therefore, school governance is viewed as the story of how ordinary people eventually obtain a say in the running of their schools (Gann, 1998:7). However, this presupposes that all major stakeholders have a clear understanding of what running a school entails.

In view of the complex functions prescribed for school governing bodies (SGBs) in South African schools, sound training should be provided for proper discharge of the multiple duties bestowed upon them to avoid the so-called “muddling through” approach (Holt & Murphy, 1993:175). In view of this, we report on the tasks of the school governors, challenges to fulfilling these tasks, the training received by governing body members, and the extent to which this training has succeeded in preparing them for the fulfilment of their functions. The research was conducted by means of a literature study and a qualitative inquiry, within the context of selected rural schools in the Free State.

School governance in a democratic South Africa

Decentralised school governance presupposes a devolvement of power from

the central level of government down through the system to the local level (Squelch, 2000:129) and is generally based on the premise that the state should share its power with other stakeholders, particularly those closer to the school, on a partnership basis (Marishane, 1999:78). Prior to 1994, statutory school level structures did exist. These structures were known, *inter alia*, as school committees, school boards or management councils. They consisted of parents and had only limited decision-making powers. In general, most parents in black and coloured communities rejected the credibility of these structures and it was only with the upsurge of political activity after the 1976 student uprising that non-legislative Parent Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs) were established in schools in these formerly oppressed communities (DoE, 2004:27). These bodies, as well as the legislative bodies in the mainly white schools, provided much needed experience for stakeholders of elected school governance structures.

In 1996, with the promulgation of the South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (RSA, 1996), hereafter referred to as SASA, shape was given to the guiding principles for education in South Africa, namely, access, redress, equity and democratic governance. This Act provides, *inter alia*, for the decentralisation of power to school level through the establishment of school governing bodies with considerable powers.

Composition, functions and need for training of school governing bodies

According to SASA membership of SGBs comprises elected members, the school principal and co-opted members. Elected members of the governing body comprise individuals from the following categories: parents of learners at the school, educators at the school, members of staff who are not educators, and learners in the eighth grade or higher in secondary schools. Regardless of school size, parents always hold a majority through 50% plus one member representation. Governing bodies have the option of co-opting a member, or members, of the community to the governing body. The term of membership of the SGB is three years (except for learners in secondary schools, who serve a one-year period) and election occurs in the same year in all schools nationwide.

Subject to sections 20 and 21 of SASA (Republic of South Africa (RSA), 1996), the governing body of a public school must develop the mission statement of the school, adopt a code of conduct for learners of the school and determine the admission and language policy of the school. An SGB may suspend learners found guilty of misconduct from attending the school as a correctional measure for a period not exceeding one week. SGBs may also recommend the appointment of teaching (and other) staff at the school and deal with disciplinary hearings of educators. The SGB should also support the principal, educators and other staff in the performance of their professional functions. SGBs are also tasked with supplementing the resources supplied by the state to improve the quality of education provided by the school. In this regard parents may be asked to pay school fees. Such funds are administered

by the governing body. The SGB may employ educators additional to those allocated and salaried by the provincial departments of Education as long as the school raises funds for these additional teachers. The SGB may also oversee the maintenance of school property and buildings. These are extensive and complicated tasks and it has been observed with concern that some functions of SGBs are contingent on the social conditions of schools as well as the capacity differential of some SGBs (Karlsson, 2002:331). This appears to entrench existing social inequalities at schools. It can therefore be argued that unless all governance functions and responsibilities are equally accessible and practised in schools, the democratisation of schooling in South Africa is tenuous and nothing more than policy rhetoric (Karlsson, 2002:132).

Clearly the SASA represents a sophisticated form of democratic school management and it can only be successful if school governors possess the required competences. The ability of parent governors to govern schools depends on their skills, knowledge and experience of governance, including financial skills. Moreover, governors require training in participatory decision-making. However, neither parents nor educators have had much experience of participatory decision making since, in the past, principals were considered to be the only people with the knowledge and authority to make decisions (Heystek & Paquette, 1999:191). These abilities required by governors are determined, among other things, by educational background, especially literacy level, of governors (Bush & Heystek, 2003:1; Heystek, 2006:478) and the skills deficit in this regard is most acutely observed in schools in disadvantaged and rural areas (Nelushi, 2006). Poorly educated parents lack management expertise and may struggle to interpret the content of the SASA (Heystek, 2006:482). This impacts on their relationship with other members of the SGB, particularly the principal, and their understanding of their tasks (Heystek, 2004:431). The need for capacity among school governors as indicated in this discussion is further borne out by the research (albeit using a comparatively small sample) conducted for the Review of School Governance in South African Public Schools (Department of Education, 2004).

Therefore, the training of school governing bodies remains a priority for the successful functioning of SGBs. It is therefore the state's responsibility, in partnership with other stakeholders, to develop capacity for governing bodies, which will ensure that SGBs perform their duties and responsibilities effectively and efficiently (Marishane, 1999:59). Adams and Waghid (2003:2) further argue that training for school governors must be seen in terms of both introductory training for newly elected governing body members (every three years) to enable them to perform their functions and continuous training for governing bodies to promote the effective performance of their functions or to enable them to assume additional functions.

Research design

In the light of the need for specialised training of school governors in South African schools, as indicated in the foregoing discussion, a qualitative inquiry

was conducted to explore the training received by governing body members and the extent to which this training had succeeded in preparing them for the fulfilment of their functions. The research was conducted within the context of selected rural schools in the Free State. Qualitative approaches to research can broadly be described as being methods that produce findings not arrived at by statistical procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1990:17). Generally speaking, qualitative research is typically used to answer questions about the complex nature of a phenomenon, often with the purpose of describing and understanding the phenomenon from the participants' point of view (Leedy & Ormrod, 2001:101; Bogdan & Biklen, 1998:146).

In this research, three rural schools in the Free State that had recently elected new SGBs were purposefully selected for the research. The schools included were a primary school catering for Grade R – 6 classes, an intermediate school catering for Grade 7 – 9 classes, and a secondary school catering for Grade 10 – 12 classes. A total of 37 participants, all members of the SGBs of the three participating schools, were included in the study. This comprised three principals, seven educators, 20 parents, three non-teaching staff, and four learners. The primary researcher held a position in the provincial department with certain responsibilities for training of SGBs. This had initially informed him with regard to the scope of and need for training in the province. He explained the purpose of the research to participants and obtained their informed consent. The field research took place over a period of 15 months, the period during which the participants underwent SGB training. The *first general training* for SGB members was based on the Training Manual for School Governing Bodies, provided by the particular province. A few weeks later, a *second short, specific training session* was offered, followed a few months later by a *third short, specific training session*. The second and third training sessions were based on the needs of the SGBs as identified by the participants. After each of the three training sessions, respectively, focus group interviews were conducted with participants. In the focus groups, participants were posed a leading question regarding the value and experience of training and the emphasis was on the interaction between participants with the researcher taking a less active role in directing talk (Barbour, 2008:18). Finally, after the training was completed a formal meeting of each of the three selected SGBs was observed to explore how members functioned within this context. The primary researcher acted as participant observer during the observation of SGB meetings and field notes were made. Interviews conducted with school governors were recorded on audiotape and later transcribed. Data were analysed according to procedures typical of qualitative methodology and peer-checking of interpretation of findings by two experienced researchers was undertaken to triangulate data.

Findings

Successful training of SGBs, based on the needs of their members, is believed to be a prerequisite for effective, decentralised and co-operative school gover-

nance (Looyen, 2000:4; Sibuyi, 1997:59). The findings of this research showed that, although parts of the training offered were received with enthusiasm, certain weaknesses needed to be addressed.

Positive aspects of the training programme

Participants regarded the following issues as positive and felt that they contributed to the success of the training:

Training was offered at a suitable time

The majority of participants indicated that Sundays were suitable days to be given training. One parent stated:

The majority of us feel that Sundays are better suited for our training. I know that some of the people, including myself, want to go to church on Sunday. But I am making a humble plea that we should just sacrifice for our own development because training comes once in a while.

Although Sundays were not convenient for the official offering the training, he adhered to the request, with the result that the training sessions were well attended. Choosing a suitable time is of particular importance where school governing body members are farm labourers, as many farmers are reluctant to give their workers time off during the week to attend to school matters.

Members were trained at the beginning of their term of office

The majority of the governors appreciated the timing of the training — which was just after they were elected and about to start with their governance tasks. One educator participant commented that:

Training has come at the right time when we needed it the most. Without training we can fumble a lot in the dark, but with training we can see where we are going.

Likewise, some of the members who were re-elected onto the SGBs mentioned that:

In the past, training was given to SGB members long after they were serving. Sometimes training was never conducted.

Sufficient time for relevant training was provided

The first general training programme was offered over a period of two days and dealt with the content of the Training Manual for School Governing Bodies. Thereafter, two specific training sessions informed by the needs of the SGB members were offered over a period of a few months. Most indicated that they appreciated this very much. As one participant explained:

This training has been very effective and efficient because it was presented piecemeal. Knowledge or information was not pumped into us as if we were machines. We were given ample time to ask questions and to assimilate what we learned.

The SGB members also expressed their satisfaction concerning the relevance of the training sessions. One of the participants said:

The fact that the training addresses our specific needs, we feel it is very relevant to our problems and we are therefore happy about it.

A training manual and supporting resources were provided

The SGB members were taken through the training manual to induct them into their roles, functions and responsibilities. Most of the governors found the training manual detailed enough as a reference. However, the facilitator also compiled supplementary notes and provided pamphlets in the languages of the participants. The governors found these to be particularly useful as confirmed by one of them:

We can now relate to the supplementary notes and feel that they have meaning to us because we can make sense of them. We think we will be in a position to internalise its content.

Use of an external agent to provide training

The SGB members were particularly impressed by the fact that the Department of Education was providing training for them, and that it was not being done by the school principal. One of the non-educator participants said:

We cannot believe everything we are told by principals. Some of them are not truthful and can easily mislead us.

During interviews with the researcher most of the SGB members valued the open manner in which matters of concern were addressed. They also mentioned that they felt that they could rely on a person outside the school to best deal with sensitive matters. The governors felt confident about their ability to fulfil their tasks following the training sessions. One commented:

We feel that we are now armed with information. Nobody can take us for granted because we have received satisfactory answers and clarification on all matters.

Administrative support for the training was provided

Although this should be provided by the provincial authorities, the SGB chairpersons and school principals played an important role in ensuring that the logistic arrangements for the training sessions were always in order. Furthermore, they were committed to the success of the training sessions. Likewise, the participants accepted ownership of the training arrangements as evidenced by a comment from a principal:

Ladies and gentlemen, this is our training. Let us therefore volunteer to participate in all the logistic arrangements relating to it. We shall be doing that for ourselves and not for anybody else.

This enabled the facilitator of the workshops to use school facilities and equipment for the benefit of those attending the workshops.

Negative aspects of the training programme

Weaknesses in the training as identified by participants were as follows:

Inadequate funding of training programmes

In spite of the provisions of SASA, which stipulate that the Department of Education in a province should provide training for newly elected SGB members, this was often not done. For this reason, participants explained in the interview that they had had to contribute financially to the training. This included contributions to providing refreshments during training. A centrally located school had made their school hall available for the training sessions. This arrangement had made it possible for most school governors to walk to the training sessions; the exception was members who lived on farms who had to organise their own transport. Some of the latter arranged to stay with relatives to save travelling costs, which illustrates the importance that these SGB members had attached to the training. One remarked:

Without training, SGB members cannot exercise their governance responsibilities successfully.

However, it also illustrates the lack of commitment of provincial departments to make provision in their budgets for training of SGBs.

English only training material

Of particular concern to school governors is the fact that all written material provided by the province is available only in English. One parent asked:

Why don't we have these manuals in our own languages that we can understand? We don't understand English because it is not our language.

The practice of providing training for school governors mainly in English has had the effect of marginalising many African language speakers (DoE, 2004: 61). In the report of the Review Committee on School Governance (DoE 2004: 62) mention is made of parents complaining that the extensive use of English inhibits the participation of many black parents in school governance.

Lack of sensitivity to the diverse needs of SGB members

Currently, all members serving on a particular school governance structure are trained at the same time. A number of participants criticised this approach. One parent commented:

I do not understand why we are not trained alone ... I feel embarrassed if I had to say I do not understand something in the presence of learners. It belittles me in front of the children.

Parent governors in particular may be understandably uncomfortable about acknowledging a lack of knowledge about SASA and general management expertise in front of learners, as also indicated by Heystek (2006:482-483). The Review of School Governance (DoE, 2004:63) also found that adult governors at several sites questioned the representation of learners on SGBs, thus compromising the important input learners can make. However, inclusion of all governors, including learners, in simultaneous training prepares the governing body to work together as a team with mutual respect for all members. This outcome would be compromised if learners are not part of training programmes for SGBs.

Lack of key information

A number of SGB members complained of not having sufficient information at their disposal to take informed decisions. This, they felt, compromised the way in which they fulfilled their tasks. Moreover, some believed that privileged information was being withheld from them. One of the participants elaborated:

We do not get prompt feedback from some of our colleagues when they attend workshops or meetings. We do not get the information when it is still fresh but when it is actually stale and irrelevant.

An educator governor at the same school added:

How can one provide support and guidance if one lacks information?

According to one of the participants the lack of information could be attributed to the following:

Principals deliberately hide information from educators probably because they do not want SGB members to be informed or to be empowered.

This remark also illustrates that, at some schools, there is a measure of tension between school governance and school management.

Limiting contextual factors

The school context plays an important role in shaping the behaviour of learners. This, in turn, impacts on the school and the culture of teaching and learning that governance and management structures should aim to establish. One issue consistently mentioned by the participants was the increasing number of orphans in schools. One principal explained:

The number of orphans is on the rise, whether due to HIV/AIDS or not, I cannot tell. But one thing for sure — we cannot feed the needy and hungry learners that we have at the school.

Under these circumstances, even the social capital in communities is subject to immense strain and cannot easily be put to use for the purpose of building the school (DoE, 2004:49).

Another contextual issue that participants believed had a negative impact on schools was the adherence of traditional leaders in rural communities to certain customs and rites. SASA stipulates that SGBs must provide quality education for all learners at their schools. This includes the responsibility of ensuring that learners attend school regularly. As a result, the initiation practice of cultural leaders has serious implications for SGBs. One member of the SGB explained:

Please you must understand me well. I do not say initiation schools do not have a place in the new democracy. What I am saying is that the timing of the initiation schools is not favourable for learners. Learners are kept there for long and do not return in time to complete their academic year.

The view of an educator governor concurred:

It really makes one wonder whether some parents are serious about the education of their children. By the time the initiations finish with their cultural customs and return to school, they are already behind with their education. It then becomes a problem how to catch up with their fellow learners who were at school all along.

It seemed therefore that SGBs in rural schools were finding it difficult to address the adherence to traditions and customs at the expense of formal education. SGB members also felt that government's directive that they solve this sensitive problem themselves was unrealistic — even more so if government does not provide training on ways of dealing with such issues.

Another contextual issue that impacted on some schools was that of violence within the community. As a legal structure tasked with ensuring the safety and discipline of learners in the school, the SGBs are required to play a role in addressing this problem. One of the parents argued that the root cause of gangsterism and violence in schools in rural areas could also be attributed to initiation schools:

To cite an example, we are experiencing a problem of gangsters in our community started by the initiates who come from different initiation schools ... This type of a situation leads to a power struggle as to which group or gang is strong enough to control the terrain. Innocent people become targets of crime and violence.

However, the problem of violence is more complex and other societal issues such as a lack of parental guidance, unemployment, and lack of values also contribute to violence and gangsterism. The need to address the situation before it gets out of hand was realised by one educator governor:

We cannot talk of safe schools if within our schools we have the element of hooligans. Vulnerable learners and educators end up being victims of these gangsters or thugs that have become a threat to peace and order in our communities. Drug misuse and abuse result from irresponsible thugs. In the final analysis nobody will be safe.

It seemed that SGBs in rural areas had to address a number of contextual issues that may not necessarily have been the same as those found in urban communities. Cognisance needs to be taken of this and training programmes should be designed to equip school governors with the skills and competencies needed to deal with these issues.

Need for strategies to deal with learner misconduct in schools

Many participants, with the exception of learner governors, felt that misbehaviour in schools was increasing and that this could be attributed to the fact that corporal punishment is no longer allowed. One parent exclaimed:

We were beaten during our school days and nothing happened to us. Did we die? No, here we are still alive and kicking! It is not even written on my face that I was beaten. In fact my educators opened my eyes and my mind.

The principal of one of the schools agreed, adding:

The abolishment [sic] of corporal punishment has really brought more harm than good to our schools. Learners are without discipline or respect because they know that they cannot be corporally punished. It is so difficult if not impossible to have control over learners without a stick and still have order.

Most SGB members agreed and felt that they had no recourse to alternative and less demeaning ways of punishing learners. One educator serving on the SGB blamed government for this:

In the meantime the government has failed to provide educators with something tangible as an alternative to corporal punishment ... The result is that learners do anyhow they please and there is nothing you can do as an educator. You dare touch learners and they lay an assault charge against you. Then you will rot in jail and lose your job in the final analysis.

School governors who had appeared before the Review Committee on School Governance expressed similar sentiments. They also claimed that school management and provincial Departments of Education were not assertive enough in dealing with learner discipline issues and that this was problematic, particularly in light of the abolition of corporal punishment (DoE, 2004: 90; Mabeba & Prinsloo, 2000). Misconduct in schools has become a problem and it seemed that SGBs are not able to deal with this without resorting to corporal punishment. This needs to be addressed in training programmes for SGBs.

Need for skills regarding the curriculum

In spite of legislation, stakeholders serving on school governing structures will not be able to play a significant role if they lack adequate expertise in the field of education. Guskey and Peterson (1996:12) warn that a lack of knowledge of educational matters will result in school governors avoiding, ignoring, or neglecting issues related to teaching and learning. Moreover, many parent governors in rural schools are illiterate or semi-illiterate and perceive their involvement in curriculum matters as an encroachment on the professional terrain of educators. One principal explained:

In fact many parents feel that this is a matter to be deliberated upon by educators. This is where the matter becomes a concern to the curriculum committee.

Despite the stipulations of SASA that parents should be involved in deciding on the curriculum design of their schools, parent governors felt that educators were better equipped to deal with such matters. One parent commented:

I find the participation of parents in drawing up Work Programmes for the Foundation Phase in primary schools ... quite a challenge. I say this because many of us battle to understand some of the terms used. Besides we are not as highly educated like the educators.

In practice, the parent governors on the SGBs avoided dealing with school curriculum matters or remained passive during meetings dealing with this issue.

According to the South Africa Yearbook 2004/2005, the number of people who have completed primary education since 1994, and who are therefore functionally literate, has moved from 63% to 80% (RSA, 2004:431). In spite of this, the Review of School Governance reports that 44% of participants felt that the skills deficit of SGB members weakens the effective functioning of SGBs (DoE, 2004:91). Notwithstanding these statistics, the problem of low levels of schooling or no schooling at all is still a feature of South African society.

Guidelines to improve the training of SGBs

One rationale for decentralising school governance is the argument that it will improve decision-making about teaching and learning, result in more effective use of resources, and contribute to more effective practices and outcomes. However, although parents have more knowledge of local conditions, they often know little about larger educational issues that are just as important in determining an appropriate course of action (Levin, 1998:261). Based on the above, a number of guidelines for training programmes can be suggested.

Effective organisation of training

To be effective, training sessions of SGB members should be well organised. This point was emphasised by one of the participants:

Training programmes of SGBs should be planned and budgeted for long before the execution thereof. Such training will benefit the trainees because they can plan their personal matters to coincide with the training.

Since learning is cumulative and skills need to be practised, enough time should be allocated to the training of SGB members. One of the participants commented that:

We are not equally gifted to grasp the big chunks of information forced down on us. Training should be spread evenly through the week.

The Review Committee acknowledges this point, adding that different training strategies should be explored (DoE, 2004:101). The Committee believes that strategies such as using oral presentation, posters, and story-boards could be tailored to the level of the participants and would not necessarily require that participants be able to read and write.

Training provided in the vernacular

Training of a heterogeneous group of school governors presents a problem regarding choice of language to be used. Clearly, there are tensions and conflicts among the different language groups, as expressed by one parent:

It is evident that English is considered the better language as compared to IsiZulu or Sesotho. We are given training manuals written in English only regardless whether we grasp it or not.

In South Africa most people are conversant in only two or three of the 11 official languages. Although the policy of the country is to move towards multilingualism, it is a great challenge to train all the participants at the same time in a language that they understand and can communicate in. The least provinces can do is to make training manuals available in all languages spoken in the province. This is of particular importance in rural areas where many people only understand the local vernacular. Moreover, training of school governors should take cognisance of poor education and low literacy levels as these factors should not exclude potential governors.

Training of SGB members should be needs-driven

Training programmes of SGB members should be tailor-made to the needs of the local school community. Such training sessions should be relevant, easy

to assimilate and motivating to the targeted group. One of the participants commented that:

The Education Department must find out what the needs of SGB members are. Training should not just be provided for the sake of training but should be informed by the needs of the community.

The onus lies on the presenter of the training programme to determine areas, in which SGB members lack knowledge and competencies, before embarking on any formal training programme. Research has indicated that if the training programme is based on the needs of the community, the SGB members will feel recognised and respected (Sibuyi, 1997:31). It is also recommended that aspects of cultural diversity and team building should form an integral part of the training of SGBs. Likewise it is felt that rigorous and continuous training should be offered to SGB members of rural communities. This is necessary, *inter alia*, because SGB members serving schools situated in poor socio-economic communities are often struggling to survive and have little energy for school obligations, and therefore need additional help (Van Wyk, 2001:196).

Focus on training for specialised tasks

Although SGB members need training to cope with all their prescribed tasks, many mentioned that certain specialised tasks proved to be difficult in their particular contexts. These included dealing with school finances, interviewing educators for appointments/promotions, and taking decisions on curriculum matters. These issues will need particular attention in training programmes offered to SGB members. This research also revealed that the low levels of schooling of the majority of SGB members had a negative impact on their participation in curriculum matters and that parents generally considered educators to be more qualified and knowledgeable to deal with such issues. As a result, principals and educators found themselves handling curriculum matters in schools. It is therefore recommended that the powers given to SGBs (especially rural SGBs) with regard to curriculum matters, be reviewed. It is also recommended that consideration be given to including curriculum matters in the competency of principals and educators who are dealing with professional matters of the school.

The Review Committee established that the differentiation of schools in terms of their status or functions (e.g. Section 21 or non-Section-21) impacted on the level of functionality of the SGBs. Section 21 schools, for example, were better able to procure items they needed than non-Section-21 schools that had to follow bureaucratic procedure when accessing their "paper budget" This should be addressed in specialised training programmes.

Many SGB members reported experiencing problems in dealing with school finances. It is recommended that, during training sessions, simple and user-friendly procurement processes be formulated to assist SGBs to access and use their allocated funds. Training SGBs in the financial management of their schools will empower SGB members to take control of their financial accounting responsibilities. McPherson and Naicker (2002:53) found that is-

sues such as the socio-economic environment of a school and the attendant financial implications have a profound impact on effective school governance. Systematic inequality between a small number of rich schools for whites and middle-class blacks and a majority of poorly resourced, mainly black, schools is likely to increase in the long run (Weber, 2001:285). The Review Committee therefore also recommends that additional resources should be secured to enhance the training of all SGB members in fund-raising and good accounting practices (DoE, 2004:118).

Adequate funding of training

According to SASA, it is the responsibility of government, through the provincial education departments, to train SGB members. Therefore enough money should be appropriated for initial and ongoing training of SGB members. One of the SGB chairpersons complained that:

The Education Department should do everything in its power to allocate enough money to schools for the ongoing training of SGBs if it wants to give over the responsibility of the training of SGBs to schools completely.

It is also essential that continuous training be provided and not just an introductory course when school governors are elected. As a fairly large number of SGB members resign during their three-year term of office, provision should be made to train new members.

Clarification of the roles of different groups of SGB members

Training of SGB members is essential in building capacity for all members and ensuring successful school governance. Training should also ensure that all members of the SGBs understand their roles and responsibilities within the school. This does not always happen. For example, we found that, in practice, principals were often reluctant to relinquish or even share their power and authority with other SGB members. This is in line with other research which indicates that many principals seem determined to have the major share of power in SGBs even though they only hold *ex officio* status (DoE, 2004:65). This was particularly the case in schools situated in previously disadvantaged communities, where in the past principals had controlled schools with little or no participation from teachers and parents (Looyen, 2000:67; Mabasa & Themane, 2002:112). Karlsson (2002:332) ascribes the reluctance of parents, to challenge the principal on any issue, to parents' poor understanding of their role, a capacity deficit in the range of skills needed to perform governance functions and irregular attendance of meetings. Training of SGB members reduces their reliance on principals and brings about a realisation that all SGB members are equally important in making SGBs successful, particularly where principals provide support and leadership. On the other hand, it is important for parents to understand the distinction between management and governance and that parents should not try to prescribe how the school should be managed.

Learners in secondary schools are represented on school governing structures. However, in general their participation at meetings is poor and

their efforts are directed largely at fundraising, learner discipline, and sport activities. One of the reasons for this may be that most learner representatives are never trained for their task (Heystek, 2001:215). On the other hand, Karlsson (2002:333) contends that since 2001 learner members are becoming more familiar with school governance and appear to be engaging in proceedings more confidently and are less intimidated by the adult members than in the first years of school governance in South Africa. However, learners still need considerable training to enable them to take up their rightful role, bearing in mind, however, that learners are only in office as governors for one year.

Conclusion

The importance of the role that is played by SGB structures, as dictated by the legal prescripts contained in the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa and SASA, cannot be overemphasised. However, in spite of legislation, stakeholders serving on school governing structures will not be able to play a significant role if they lack adequate expertise in the field of education. Thus, Van Langen and Dekkers (2001:380) argue that decentralisation of school governance can bring with it the possibility of extreme inequalities — “the possibility that the local community, including parents and educators, may not have the knowledge and resources to adequately protect the quality of education provided to their children”. The danger of this occurring in poor rural communities is very real and can only be addressed if SGBs in these communities are well trained.

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