Transformation of the South African schooling system

The Fault-lines in South African School Governance: Policy or People?

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List of Acronyms

CEPD	Centre for Education Policy Development
DoE	Department of Education
PTSA	Parent Teacher Student Association
SASA	South African Schools Act
SEM	Superintendent of Education Management
SGB	School Governing Body

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About the Publication

In 1997, the CEPD and its partner organisations (the Education Policy Units based at the Universities of the Witwatersrand, Natal and Fort Hare) embarked on a major longitudinal study – Education 2000 Plus. The study sought to track and examine the transformation of the schooling system in South Africa, focusing on the policies and programmes of the new government. The study was undertaken over a period of five years, and several intermediate reports emerged as the study progressed.

Towards the end of the study, the team spent a year examining and analysing the data, with a view to sharing the findings of the study with regard to the extent, nature and direction of education transformation in South Africa, specifically in relation to the schooling system.

The papers in this series – *Transformation of the South African Schooling System* – reflect on that process. The papers in this series have undergone a several review processes. Firstly, they were all presented at a national conference that was held in 2004. Following comments that were received at the conference, the papers were revised. The papers were then given to two independent reviewers.

The ten papers in the series have all undergone the review processes discussed above. Each of these papers provides an account of the transformation processes relating to the schooling system. The titles in this series are as follows:

1. Change Agents in the South African Schooling System: Challenges and Prospects, *George Moyo*
2. "Transformation" Revisited, *Enver Motala*
3. Transformation in the School Environment: An Analysis of Photographs from One Rural Secondary School, *Jenni Karlsson*
4. Exploring the Mutability of School Ethos during South Africa's First Post-apartheid Decade, *Jenni Karlsson and Sandile Mbokazi*

5. Prospects and Challenges of Doing Social Justice Research: Experiences from the Education 2000 Plus Study, *Madumetja Kgobe and George Moyo*
6. Policy Change and the Experiences of Learners in Post-apartheid Schooling, *John Pampallis and Princess Tabata*
7. The Fault-lines in South African School Governance: Policy or People?, *Veerle Dieltiens*
8. Districts: Looking for a Place in the Education System, *Hersheela Narsee*
9. Teacher Professionalism and Education Transformation, *Julie Douglas*
10. Selected Macro-indicators of Education Transformation, 1991-2001, *Monica Bot*

Each of these papers reflect the multiple dimensions of the change processes, and the many aspects and features of transformation. Collectively, the papers suggest that important achievements have been made in driving education transformation towards an open, democratically organised quality for all, although major challenges remain.

1. Introduction

The primary value of decentralising decision making to school governing bodies (SGBs) lies in our intuitive belief that it is those at the chalk-face of learning and teaching who are in the best position to make the right decisions for our learners. We trust that when parents, educators and learners engage in co-operative decision making, the decisions will be ones that all (or at least most) stakeholders agree to. As the South African Schools Act (SASA) points out, governance structures in schools function as one of the strategies to advance democracy and social justice in the education system. They do this by opening up school practices to the scrutiny of parents, undermining the often demagogic power of the principal and including a greater range of people in setting the vision and mission of the school.

Recently, however, doubt has been cast on the effectiveness of SGBs both in governing schools and in acting to transform the education system. This paper examines two broad and conflicting arguments behind the lacklustre performance of SGBs: on the one hand the fault lies in the way policy has been articulated and implemented; on the other hand governors themselves are held responsible for letting down school governance. These are two competing explanations. The first set of arguments suggests that governors cannot do their job because the legislation is unnecessarily complex and therefore inaccessible to parents, especially since training has been inadequate. Furthermore, the policy is embedded in a neo-liberal framework that emphasises the role of governors as fundraisers over their supervisory role of the mission and vision of the school. These critics have faith in direct democracy. The second set of arguments maintains that governors cannot do their job because there is something particular to schools and education that requires knowledge and information that parents do not usually have. These critics put their faith in indirect democracy (that is, representative democracy and centralisation).

In exploring these two arguments, I will claim that each of these positions holds some truth – and this is because the current model of school governance in South Africa attempts to bridge the goals of both direct and indirect democracy. This is perhaps not unusual in a period of transition, a time likely to show up the ambiguities of

demands for greater local participation and for centrally directed transformation. Furthermore, I argue that an important pin holding together stakeholder participation in schools with legislative imperatives is the school principal and that, while devolving authority, the state must paradoxically increase its support to both the principal and the SGB.

This paper begins with a brief account of the model of school governance laid out in the South African Schools Act of 1996 (DoE, 1996). It then offers some of the reasons for the undistinguished performance of SGBs, drawing on the experiences of schools investigated as part of the Education 2000 Plus Project, before returning to reflect on SASA.

2. Democratic governance

The push to decentralise governing authority to schools has its historical roots in the Parent Teacher Student Associations (PTSAs) of the liberation movement and the parent associations of the former Model C schools. However, there were opposing motives. For the democratic movement, broad-based participation in schools was essential to transform schools, to undermine structural hierarchies and to provide a platform for previously unheard voices in making decisions on schooling matters. For the apartheid government, on the other hand, including parents in governing bodies was premised on keeping schools much the same as they had been, mainly through maintaining the socio-economic status of schools

In 1996 the South African government introduced a unitary model of public school governance that devolved significant governance and management decision making to schools. The South African Schools Act (DoE, 1996) allocated several responsibilities to governing bodies, including school-based budgeting, local interpretation and application of national policies such as language and religious policies, maintenance of school sites and facilities, and power to recommend the employment of educators and employ additional staff. SASA carefully legislated governing body composition. Governing bodies are democratically elected and reflect parent, educator, non-educator staff and, in secondary schools, learner

constituencies. Parents have a majority stake in order to ensure that previously marginalised constituencies have a greater voice.

However, while the intention of SASA is clearly to open up channels for wider participation at school level, it must be remembered that SGBs fit within a legislative framework that limits and controls what they are able to do. The democratic imperatives are as much top-down as they are strengthening community participation. Suzanne Grant Lewis and Jordan Naidoo (2004) explain that

> while promoting local democratic processes and parent/community ownership, the South African Government faces additional challenges of needing to integrate the historically decentralised system, improving the efficiency of the system, and redressing apartheid imbalances.

These obligations typically require centralised levers of reform. The hoped-for outcome of local school autonomy is therefore set within a broader democratic mandate to transform education.

SGBs lie at the axis of the tension between the imperatives to decentralise and to centralise. Proponents on the side of decentralisation typically argue that active participation of citizens in local (as well as national) arenas is a crucial indicator of democracy. Whether governance structures become forces for change or stalwarts of the status quo depends on whether the policy environment creates the right conditions for SGBs to feasibly perform their legislated mandate. Crucial, too, are the ability, drive and determination of parents, learners and teachers sitting on SGBs. As Iris Marion Young (2000:5) reminds us, “using democratic process to promote legal, administrative, and social change toward greater justice is hard work”. For participatory democrats, the problems experienced by SGBs relate to the technical (and in particular, financial) articulations in policy which direct governors’ behaviour in a determinist way.

For advocates of centralisation, on the other hand, democracy is better served by stricter controls on SGBs. Participation needs to be carefully controlled and monitored to press forward with policies agreed on by the democratically elected representatives at state

level. For such "realist" democrats, SGBs fail because too much is expected from them. An idealised notion of participation neglects questions of authority and power in local democratic structures and the ability of governors to carry out their functions.

The next section looks at both these explanations for the lacklustre performance of SGBs.

3. What's to blame: policy or practice?

3.1 Blaming policy

For participatory democrats, the value of school governance lies in its promotion of the active participation of stakeholders in deliberating (and reaching consensus) on the nature and ethos of schooling. SGBs are essentially involved in problem solving in ways that all (or at least most) stakeholders can agree to. As Iris Marion Young (2000:5) explains, "The normative legitimacy of a democratic decision depends on the degree to which those affected by it have been included in the decision-making processes and have had the opportunity to influence the outcomes". This challenge for inclusion, Young argues, requires deeper conditions than "nominal voting rights", attending to issues such as modes of communicating, social difference and civic organizing. For participatory democrats, the reason SGBs fall short of accomplishing their duties is in the failure of the legislation and its implementers to create the right framework and conditions for participation to flourish.

There appear to be at least two main difficulties with the legislation: the first has to do with the inclusion of fundraising in the tasks of the SGB; the second is the complexity of the legal requirements that SGBs have to fulfil.

Early on, when the Schools Act was promulgated, concerns were raised about the way in which the policy defined the functions of SGBs. While there was general applause for the substantive decision-making powers handed to school governors, some analysts were troubled by the role of SGBs in setting fees and fundraising for the schools. Karlsson, McPherson and Pampallis (2001) point out that within a context of fiscal austerity economic policies and cuts in

spending, the Department of Education had to look to parents to supplement its budget. As they put it, “It had been argued by the Model C lobby as well as by some within the broad democratic movement that school fees would bring private resources into the school system and thus government would be freer to channel state resources to those schools in greatest need” (Karlsson, McPherson and Pampallis, 2001:157). However, the inclusion of fundraising responsibilities into the SGB work programme introduced market directives into the governance discourse. From parents exercising their rights as citizens in educational institutions, there was an imperceptible shift to parents (or rather learners) as consumers of education services. One’s stake in education, therefore, depended on whether one paid for it. The SGB functions more like a Board of Governors in a corporate model than a platform for citizens to engage in educational deliberations. We hear, for example, of some SGBs referring to learners and parents as “clients”. Everard Weber (2002:630) argues: “The interesting feature of the SASA is that both in regard to the collection of user fees and the administration of schools, parents are viewed as taking the job of the state. Their ‘empowerment’ was compromised by new accompanying responsibilities”. For Weber, as policy makers became more comfortable with the dictates of cost recovery and efficiency, so they drifted away from democratic concerns with participation and equity.

Although the *National Norms and Standards for School Funding* document (DoE, 1998) was careful to ensure that SGBs had to get the consent of the parent body when setting fees and in spelling out the procedure for fee exemption, parent representatives on SGBs were placed in the awkward position of having to collect fees (often through legal censure) from those whose interests they were purporting to stand for. The cumbersome means test which accompanied the exemption process further alienated parent representatives from their constituents. Vally (2002) suggests that school governing bodies are in an “invidious situation”. He argues that in order to protect the revenue-raising power of the school, it is in their interest to minimise the enrolment of non-paying pupils. In impoverished communities, the burden of establishing, retrieving, and exempting parents from paying fees is particularly onerous. Many parents on SGBs thus view their role as co-opted and glorified fund-raisers rather than as co-decision makers in educational matters

The Education 2000 Plus case studies repeatedly mentioned the difficulties SGBs had with collecting school fees. For example, in theory the SGBs set the school fees in September, after a process of consultation with parents. However, meetings were poorly attended and many parents were either unable or reluctant to pay. Parents seeking special concessions for the remission or reduction of school fees had to account for themselves and could enter into an agreement with the school to pay a monthly amount. Defaulters were threatened by a letter from a lawyer – allegedly this was not a legal document but used simply to put pressure on defaulting parents who had not been informed that they had the right to seek exemption from fees.

The inclusion of fundraising as an SGB function resulted, therefore, in school governance having to focus, in many cases, on the sustainability of the school rather than on driving the mission and vision of educational practices. SGBs evolved into structures policing fees and exemptions.

A second problem with the policy is its fairly complex technical language. Its bureaucratic listing of SGB roles and responsibilities required that SGBs be trained to understand the legalese. SGBs are expected to be familiar with the Constitution, with the South African Schools Act and various provincial education Acts, as well as departmental regulations and circulars. Furthermore, there are regulations outside of education that schools and SGBs need to understand, such as labour laws and regulations related to procurement (if the school has Section 21 powers).[1] Such a "bureaucratic" approach to school governance seems in tension with the political nature of democratic involvement. Grant Lewis and Naidoo (2004) argue that

> at the school level, the policy statements articulate and enforce a highly structural norm, viewing parental participation in school governance through a technocratic, apolitical perspective that privileges form and structure over local meanings and process. This

[1] Section 21 status is granted to schools with capacity to undertake additional functions according to the South African Schools Act.

approach gives little consideration to the practice of the policy across diverse, historically-situated contexts that characterize post-apartheid South Africa.

Without information on their legislated duties, SGB members often defer to the school principal for guidance, especially on technical matters, such as the drawing up the school budget. The inclusion of parents into overly formalised procedures may work only to increase their alienation and frustration with decision making. Unskilled and illiterate parents were further disadvantaged, while professional parents from well-off former Model C schools grappled with SGB functions more easily. This has led to unevenness in the capacity of SGBs to perform their functions. Low and unbalanced participation levels in the day-to-day and on-going decision making of school governing bodies (McPherson, 2001) raise doubts about the efficacy of such policies as levers to effect a democratic culture in schools.

Furthermore, the difficulties experienced in delivering training to SGBs compounded the problem. As many of the disadvantaged schools in the Education 2000 Plus project reported, training was often "superficial and inadequate" with information supplied in English rather than in mother-tongue.

September: According to the District Manager, great disparities of effectiveness existed between SGBs, depending on the community of parents and such factors as their education level and financial literacy. Current school training manuals were conceded by the District Manager as being too complex and prescriptive and she felt they should be more accessible. Too much had been asked of governing bodies; they didn't for example always have capacity to select and appoint staff and so that role was currently under review in legislation

The overall effect of the problems described above is a lack of active participation. A preoccupation with compliance to legal prescriptions has resulted in a technicist view of change that does not meaningfully take into account the views of stakeholders in schools, and so disappoints the promise made in SASA.

This paper now turns to the opposing set of explanations for why SGBs fail.

3.2 Blaming the governors

While the participatory democrats argue that the decisive test of democratic education is its capacity to encourage wide-ranging participation in schools, for "realist" democrats "the index of democratisation would also be sought for in some, probably qualitative, account of the '*responsiveness* of the leaders to the led'" (Parry and Moyser, 1994:46). In this centralised democracy, government has a mandate from the electorate to drive through legislation without necessarily having to consult with them in between elections. However, this is a fairly strong view and more flexible versions would allow for some decentralisation, though with strict controls. For the realist democrat, SGBs work in partnership with government, as an accountability mechanism to ensure that policies have their intended impact. The reason, then, that the SASA model of school governance fails is that it idealises participation (at the expense of transformation) and neglects to take into account some of the dangers inherent in opening up schools to democratic consultation.

There are two main arguments underpinning why it is governors who fail rather than policy. Firstly, schools require a particular set of expertise for effective governance. Secondly SGBs slip easily into oligarchies, providing a platform for those with the social, economic and human capital to dominate.

With regard to the first argument, that SGBs require specific expertise in governing a school, Chapman *et al.* (2001:7) argue:

> There is a risk that widespread community participation in contexts in which citizens do not have a well-grounded understanding of the educational process may draw on conventional wisdom more than empirical fact about what promotes learning. For example, persuading citizens that class size and quality of facilities are less important than having adequate numbers of textbooks and greater student engagement in their learning activities is often a hard sell, even though considerable research supports both claims.

For the realist democrat, while SGBs may have democratic processes in place, the outcomes of decisions will not necessarily make educational sense. In a rural case study school in KwaZulu-Natal, for example, the SGB had spent money on sports equipment even though the school plainly lacked basic materials for learning and teaching

As the Education 2000 Plus project found, school principals again and again complained that SGBs did not have the capacity to take on governance roles, especially where illiteracy was a problem. While financial budgeting processes were particularly onerous, SGBs also failed to ensure that schools kept to policies aimed to protect learners.

> *For example, in the KZN rural school referred to above, the practice of corporal punishment was reported by the SEM as still being practiced, because some parents were still in support of this form of discipline. As another example, in September, the parents were trained and had capacity but, according to the principal, were reluctant to engage in real governance. Both the principal and the teachers saw the SGB as a redundant body, which had contributed little to the school and was in fact a nuisance since all their functions had to be performed or closely monitored by school personnel.*

SGBs also tend to be inward looking and do not have the advantage of comparing circumstances between schools. The focus is on learners currently in the school, failing to take into account the interests of learners unable to access the school.

Lack of expertise may offer one reason why parents are reluctant to participate in governance structures. However, the pathology of apathy is severely detrimental to promises of inclusivity in school governance. For the realist democrat, socio-economic realities allow those with relative advantage (in terms of status, wealth or gender) to capitalise on the opportunities provided by SGBs. This has resulted in school governance sometimes slipping into forms of oligarchies. We see, for example, the dominance of principals, often in positions of knowledge and power and able to hold rank in

decision making. Men also hold greater sway over SGB structures, particularly in their position as SGB chairs. In former Model C schools, perhaps because of the geographic location, SGBs are wholly made up of white parents.

In September, the principal rated parental participation as almost zero and described their conduct in a most scathing manner. He said they merely rubber-stamped decisions – they ceded their rights by a lackadaisical attitude, only becoming involved when it concerned their own child and they put their own businesses before school matters and engaged in trivia rather than school governance. He believed non-involvement was the best co-operation they could give.

Though financial management was a prime SGB function, the school management team drew up the budget, and the SGB merely ratified the document. According to the principal they were critical and petty about expenditure and unprepared to assist the school to raise funds necessary to make up the shortfall from unpaid school fees. They didn't arrive for tribunals and kept time erratically. The principal was disillusioned that the community had not taken action against those who tried to break into the school.

In another school, in North West, educators claimed that the SGB had a top-down approach and sowed mistrust within the school. Another complaint was that some members of the SGB misunderstood their role. An example was given that some SGB members would monitor whether educators were on time for assembly and would even marshal educators to assembly. Parents accused educators of being unprofessional and having negative attitudes towards the SGB. They said that educators had hidden agendas and were always defensive because they did not perform their duties.

Eriksen and Weigård (2000:24) argue that one reason we see a lower voter turnout in local elections than in national elections is that

> most people are involved with the local government primarily in its capacity as producer of services and less so in its capacity as political entity: in other words, they see the local council more from a consumer

perspective than from the perspective of political co-determination.

4. Conclusion

One of the explicit purposes of the South African Schools Act was to extend "democracy" in the education system. Democracy, however, has a range of connotations and implications, ranging from a centralised elected state to a decentralised system that encourages broad-based participation in political (and, in this paper, educational) decision making. As this paper has argued, both these notions of democracy are at work in SASA. The Act decentralises authority to the school level and invites the participation of a wide number of stakeholders (parents, educators and learners) in determining how schools should be run. However, power over the policy framework for school governance remains in the hands of the state. This mix of centralised and decentralised decision making and control in South African schooling is a balance of power that is contingent on functions. As this paper has argued, explanations given for the poor performance of SGBs depends on whether analysts (as well as principals, educators and parents) favour centralised or decentralised democracy.

This paper has further argued that a key in holding the balance between state imperatives and popular participation is the role played by the principal.

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