

Governors or watchdogs? The role of educators in school governing bodies

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The perceptions of educators in school governing bodies (SGBs) about their roles were investigated. The study derived its motivation mainly from a previous study on the subject and the subsequent reflection on own experiences of the situation in South African schools as an ex-official in the Department of Education. The study therefore drew largely from this previous research report. Findings revealed a great tendency for educator governors in SGBs to act as "watchdogs" for their teaching colleagues. This study pointed to composition of SGBs and attainment of membership as reasons why educator-governors perceive their role as that of watchdogs for their colleagues. The study however recognised that educator-governors also profess to have the interests of the school and therefore the learner at heart. The balancing act is therefore a challenge to them and makes their task as governors even more exigent.

Introduction and problem statement

The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 (SASA) (Republic of South Africa, 1996) ushered in a new approach to school governance in South African schools. Most significant was the democratic governance of schools through the involvement of stakeholders (Department of Education, 1996:16). For this purpose, membership of school governing bodies comprises democratically elected parents, educators, and learners in the case of secondary schools. This composition seeks to democratise school governance and, as propounded by the Education White Paper 2, is based on the core democratic values of representation, participation, tolerance, rational discussion and collective decision-making (Karlsson, 2002:329).

In terms of the SASA, the School Governing Body (SGB) is charged with governance of a public school. According to Beckmann, Foster, and Smith (1997:10) governance relates to the overall control and authority of the school, its policies and directions (*cf.* City of Liverpool, undated). This finds expression in the functions the SGB is charged with (*cf.* Knowles Hill School, 2004). According to Section 20 of the SASA the SGB must promote the best interest of the school through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school.

Therefore, the core function of the SGB is to promote the educational interests of the school and consequently of the learners. Mainly this is a strategic role in the running of the school, which implies setting the strategic framework, aims and objectives within the school's vision and mission, setting policies and targets for achieving objectives and monitoring and evaluating progress (Republic of South Africa, 1996; Bolton Metropolitan Borough, undated; Newport City Learning, 2004; Creese & Bradley, 1997:111-113).

An analysis of this provision of the SASA suggests that the SGB endows all its efforts to promoting the best interest of the school, and therefore learners. Of note, all SGB members (governors) must synergise their operative efforts towards the provision of quality education for learners, regardless of the type of stakeholder they represent. In this regard, the status and role of school governors raise some critical aspects.

Considering the composition of the SGB membership and the manner of their gaining membership, i.e. being elected, and the functions of the SGB presents a challenge for school governors in their roles and responsibilities. The notion of being elected implies they have a constituency and therefore must represent it. Bush and Gamage (2001:42) posit that members of governing bodies are elected as representatives of certain interests connected to the school, which by implication means that governors represent the interests of their constituencies, i.e. parents represent parents' interests, educators represent educators' interests and learners represent learners' interests. This in many instances results in ineffective and dysfunctional governance and tensions among governors, governors and principals as well as governors and staff.

The following is reported from previous work. Earley and Creese

(2000:476) found that educator-governors felt inhibited because of the locus of their allegiance — to the principal or to the governors. In the same research, some governors felt they were in the SGB to protect the staff or to have the best interests of the teaching staff at the forefront. Donnely (1999:288) found in one school case that there were tensions within the governing body, particularly between founder (parent) governors and teachers. In this case the principal increasingly felt that her professional expertise was being undermined mainly by parent governors. Creese and Bradley (1997:109) found in one school case that teacher governors appeared to play less part in transmitting information and ideas from the governors and staff — because "teacher-governors have a difficult role to play both sides". Thody (1999:129) reports interview responses from parent governors who reported their roles as "to be somewhere that parents can go to if they are unhappy".

Van Wyk (2004:49) reports that educators felt that their SGB members lacked confidence and were not sure about their duties and that some educators indicated that the SGB was "against them" and "inferior because they think we undermine them ..." This implies that educators are not sure of the role of the SGB and in particular, educators in the SGB and perceive the SGB in the sense of "them" and "us". This in essence means to educators, that the SGB comprises parent members regardless of educator-governors they elected.

These and many cases of polarisation between parent governors and educators in schools experienced by the researcher as a departmental official in Gauteng attest to the challenge posed by the nature of the SGB composition and status of governors (*cf.* Mabasa & Themane, 2002:114). In fact the researcher noted that largely when educators refer to the SGB, they seem to refer to parent governors, thus exhibiting a "them" and "us" relationship.

It can be concluded that educator-governors would find themselves challenged to protect the interests of their teaching colleagues. Quite clearly, this is in contrast to the spirit of the core function of the SGB, i.e. promoting the best educational interest of the learners. Earley and Creese (2000:480) assert that though the interest and views of staff may be important, they are certainly not paramount because schools exist primarily to serve the needs of learners, not the staff. In this regard, Fox (2003:2) postulates that a governing body is not a supporters' club. This implies that school governors are not there to support or be supported by their constituencies but to promote the best educational interests and needs of the learners.

The foregoing exposition informs the aims of this research, i.e. to examine the roles of school governors and expose the educator-governors' perceptions of their roles in SGBs. Therefore, this article seeks:

1. To investigate the roles of school governors;
2. to investigate the perceptions of educator-governors about their roles in school governing bodies; and
3. to provide guidelines for ensuring that educator-governors' roles are aligned with the core function of school governing bodies.

To achieve these aims, the researcher combined his own experience as

a former education specialist working with SGBs in the Gauteng Department of Education with an empirical survey of educator-governors' own perceptions of their roles in SGBs.

School governance and the role of governors

School governance is regarded as an act of determining policy and rules by which a school is to be organised and controlled, which includes ensuring that such rules and policies are carried out effectively (Maile, 2002:1). This implies that the SGB, promoting the best interests of the school and, in particular, of learners, is responsible for developing a strategy for ensuring that quality education is provided for the learners (*cf.* Fox, 2003). This is followed by ensuring that this strategy is implemented. The SGB does this through monitoring and evaluating the implementation thereof. The gap between strategy formulation and monitoring and evaluation is defined by the day-to-day management responsibility of the principal and staff (*cf.* Bush & Heystek, 2003:136). In other words, the SGB formulates a strategy for the achievement of the school's vision and mission whilst the principal and staff are responsible for the implementation thereof.

The definition of school governance means that all members of the SGB strive for the best interest of the school and learners. Therefore the role of school governors is defined by the meaning of governance. In South Africa, promoting the best interest of the school according to the SASA (Republic of South Africa, 1996) implies that school governors regardless of who elected them have to deal with, *inter alia*,

- determining the admission, language and religious policies of the school;
- determining rules for religious observance at the school;
- developing and adopting a code of conduct for learners;
- recommending to the Provincial Head of Department the appointment of educators and non-educators at the school;
- supplementing the resources provided by the state; and
- preparing an annual budget.

DfES (undated) identifies three key roles that school governors should fulfil, *viz.* providing a strategic view, act as a critical friend and ensuring accountability. Therefore, the nature of the functions describing the roles and responsibilities of the SGB definitely preclude any allegiance of school governors to any form of constituency. This is more so in the case of educator-governors. By virtue of their professional expertise, they are better situated to understand matters relating to the implementation of strategies to advance quality education. They are in a position to articulate curriculum delivery matters to parent-governors and the school parent population. This is because parent-governors "do not see themselves as educationists and do not have the expertise to become closely involved with decisions in this domain" (Shearn, Broadbent, Laughlin & Willig-Atherton, 1995:175).

This exposition clearly shows that the roles of school governors cannot be compartmentalised into those of the parent, the educator, and the learner-governors. All school governors should be involved in the SGB in roles that promote and advocate the best interests of the school and learners.

It is however disconcerting that these roles are not executed as required by the SASA or the promotion of schools' and learners' interests. The researcher's involvement with SGBs has witnessed power struggles among school governors. In some instances, principals have been accused of, and found, dominating decision-making in SGBs (*cf.* Shearn *et al.* 1995:179). In some instances, discussions with educator-governors have indicated the notion that they simply represent their teaching colleagues. They listen in meetings and go out to report to them. They do not see themselves as governors. They regard themselves as watchdogs of their teaching colleagues. The same finding is reported by Field (1993:170). As a result of this notion, educator-governors would not have discussions with educators before meetings and would not formally report-back to them. Formal report-back meetings would be held only when controversial issues concerning educators would warrant formal feedback meetings. Examples of these

meetings usually concern vacant posts, especially promotion posts, tender processes for projects involving substantial finances and disciplinary matters involving educators.

Earley and Creese (2000:485) report that research suggests three views of the role of educator-governors. First, there is the minimalist, which refers to the educator-governors who is an unwilling recruit to the SGB because no other educator was willing to stand for election. Second, there is the watchdog, which refers to the educator-governor with considerable suspicion and is concerned with protecting the educators' interest at all costs. These educators are usually involved with union affairs within the staffroom and are usually union representatives. Finally, there is the communication link, which refers to educator-governors who see themselves as the link between governors and staff and are happy to express staff views to the SGB and also to report back to staff on the proceedings of the SGB meetings.

Earley and Creese (2000:485) add a fourth view of the educator-governor, namely, the effective educator-governor. This view advocates an ideal educator-governor who contributes in the same way that other governors contribute to their school and its decision-making processes. This is the educator-governor who contributes effectively to the promotion of the best interests of the school and learners while attempting to incorporate the positive elements of the other educator-governor views.

Research design

Data collection

To determine the educator-governors' roles in SGBs, a structured questionnaire with 25 closed-ended items was developed and distributed to 200 educator-governors in schools in the Vaal Triangle, of which 108 (54%) usable questionnaires were returned. The items required respondents to indicate their roles on a balanced Likert four-point scale by indicating whether they,

1. strongly agree;
2. agree;
3. disagree; or
4. strongly disagree.

The balanced four-point scale was firstly chosen in order to eliminate the tendency of respondents to provide socially desirable responses so as to please the researcher or appear helpful. To this end Garland (1998) contends that these tendencies can be minimised by eliminating the mid-point category from the Likert scale. Secondly, the researcher sought to elicit definite answers from respondents since the questionnaire content was deemed to be specific to the roles of educators in SGBs (Hitchcock & Porter, undated).

Respondents comprised males (51%) and females (49%) from mostly township schools (78%) and largely primary schools (58%). Most respondents (56%) were in their first term as governors. On average, there were 3 educator-governors. This is per SASA requirements since most schools (94%) have enrolments of between 500 and 1000+. The majority of the respondents (78%) were from township schools.

Data analysis

Statistical data from the questionnaire analysis were coded to list the respondents' perceptions of the role they play in the SGB as educator-governors and expressed as percentages. Frequency counts were used to denote percentage responses.

Findings

Questionnaire items were categorised into what respondents perceived as their roles, what they indicated as functions of the SGB, what they indicated as how the SGB roles were performed and what they perceived their colleagues viewed as the SGB. For purposes of analysis, the 'strongly agree' and 'agree', and the 'disagree' and 'strongly disagree', categories were combined into 'agree' and 'disagree', respectively. Items relating to educator-governors' perception of their roles are depicted in Table 1.

On the whole, educator-governors largely portrayed a sense of be-

ing watchdogs for their teaching colleagues (Table 1). The majority of educators (75%) agreed that their main function was to protect the interests of their colleagues at all costs. This was echoed by the fact that they also agreed that they were able to express their teaching colleagues' views freely and honestly (72%), usually being able to argue issues out on behalf of the educators (85%) and arguing to advance their teaching colleagues' feelings about issues (79%). This finding is consistent with Early and Creese's findings reported earlier that some governors felt that their interests of their colleagues were at the forefront.

Table 1 Items relating to educator-governors' perception of their roles

Items	Agree	Disagree
1. As an educator in the SGB I feel that I play a full role in the work of the governing body	81	19
2. I feel that I make an important contribution to the governing body	78	22
3. My main function in the governing body is to protect the interests of my teaching colleagues at all costs	75	25
15. I am able to express my teaching colleagues' views freely and honestly	72	28
20. I always meet my teaching colleagues before a governing body meeting to discuss the agenda	27	73
21. I formally report back to my teaching colleagues after every SGB meeting	47	53
23. I usually argue issues out on behalf of the educators	85	15
24. My arguments in the SGB always advance my teaching colleagues' feelings about issues	79	21
25. My contribution in the SGB seeks to balance the needs of learners	93	7

It seemed strange however that at the same time, most (73%) educator-governors indicated that they did not always meet their teaching colleagues before SGB meetings to discuss the agenda whilst only 47% indicated that they formally reported back to their teaching colleagues after every SGB meeting.

Table 2 Items relating to educator-governors' perception of their roles

Items	Agree	Disagree
5. I feel that my teaching colleagues are uncertain about my role as a governing body member	49	51
8. In most instances, my teaching colleagues are not interested in the work of the SGB	61	39
9. In most instances, educators resent what they see as interference by the SGB	62	38
10. My teaching colleagues perceive the SGB as if it consists of parents only	47	53
11. My teaching colleagues welcome the involvement of the SGB and work closely with them	52	48

As depicted in Table 2, almost half (49%, 61%, 62% and 47%, respectively) agreed that their colleagues were uncertain of their roles as SGB members, were in most instances not interested in the work of the SGB, resented what they saw as interference by the SGB, and perceived the SGB as consisting of parents only. Furthermore, a significant number (48%) indicated that their teaching colleagues did not welcome the involvement of the SGB and did not work closely with it. This lends credence to Van Wyk's (2004) findings reported elsewhere in this study about the polarisation amongst governors in SGBs.

It seems educators-governors have a narrow perception of their

role by restricting themselves mostly to representing their colleagues' opinions and providing a link between the SGB and staff as also reported in Earley and Creese's findings (Early & Creese, 2000). This also alludes to a feeling of allegiance to their electorate. This contrasts with the perception that they seek to balance the needs of learners. This is indeed cause for concern since according to the SASA, learners' interests are and should be foremost in the SGBs' functioning. As Early and Creese (2000:479) assert: "though the interests and views of the staff may be important, they are certainly not paramount. Schools exist primarily to serve the needs of their pupils (learners), not the staff!".

Responses to questions relating to how the SGBs perform their functions are depicted in Table 3. Only about two-fifths (41%) of the respondents perceived their SGBs to be performing their duties effectively. Clearly, this should be the case considering that more than half (54%) disagreed to having undergone any training as school governors, although more than half (65%) indicated being certain about their roles as educator-governors. However, on whether the SGB was dominated by the SGB chairperson, most (78%) disagreed and on whether the chairperson and principal dominated, the majority (75%) disagreed. However, just over half (51%) agreed that the principal did.

Table 3 Items relating to educator-governors' perception of how SGBs perform their functions

Items	Agree	Disagree
4. I am certain about my role as an educator SGB member	65	35
6. I am intimidated in the SGB meetings by the presence of the principal	25	75
7. I am often excluded, directly or indirectly, from discussions of certain issues	47	53
12. My SGB is dominated by the principal	51	49
13. My SGB is dominated by the chairperson	22	78
14. My SGB is dominated by both the principal and chairperson	25	75
16. I am able to help other members of the SGB to understand educational issues better	80	20
17. My SGB performs governance functions effectively	41	59
18. I feel free to talk about issues happening in the school in the SGB meetings	54	46
19. I have undergone training on my role as educator component of the SGB	54	46
22. I am free to take a differing view with principal in SGB meetings	57	43

Most respondent (54%, 80% and 57%) educator-governors agreed that they were free to talk about issues happening in the school in SGB meetings, were able to help other SGB members to understand educational issues better and were free to take differing views with the principal respectively. Most respondents (53% and 75%, respectively) indicated that they were not excluded directly or indirectly discussions of certain issues and that they were not intimidated by the presence of the principal in SGB meetings.

These findings indicated the low effectiveness of school governing bodies for the most part as well as the largely unclear role of educator governors in SGBs.

Discussion

An analysis of the educator-governor respondents revealed an air of confidence about their own role as governors. However, a close scrutiny of the responses shows a number of inconsistencies. The fact that they see themselves as serving a role of representatives of their teaching colleagues while they do not discuss SGB issues before meetings and the fact their colleagues seem not interested in the work of the SGB, do not really understand their roles in the SGB and resent the involvement of the SGB and see it as interference seem significantly inconsistent. Clearly, their role is reduced to that of merely represen-

ting their colleagues and serving as a link between parent governors and staff.

That they are free to express their opinions in SGB meetings can differ with the principal and are not intimidated by the principal's presence could be relating to those issues that pertain to their colleagues' interests of which parent-governors would not be fully knowledgeable or interested in.

A most glaring conclusion that could be drawn from these results was that educator-governors perceive their role as mainly to protect their colleagues' interests. This may stem from the fact that they are elected and see themselves as representing a constituency. In this sense, promoting the best interest of the learners is lost although they claim to seek to balance the best interest of learners. Therefore, what they see as their role could actually mean "fighting" educator issues out. From personal experience many educators in SGBs have actually expressed this sentiment, i.e. they are in the SGB to listen and report back to their colleagues. This representation is largely premised on their own perceptions of what educators want, since they largely do not meet them before meetings or even report formally after meetings.

It is therefore abundantly clear that the provision of the SASA regarding the main function of the SGB and therefore, school governance, is diluted, perhaps due to governors' owing allegiance to their electorates. This is a disconcerting factor considering the real purpose of school governance. There is therefore a need to re-align the composition of the SGB in terms of how they are elected. An election procedure that allows for the election of members by all stakeholders is propounded.

In this way, SGB members would be elected on the understanding that they would perform functions in terms of the SASA. Every member who stands for election and is elected would be doing so with the full knowledge of the role to be played. The notion of being a watchdog for their constituency would be significantly reduced. Potential members would not canvass for election by making promises of protecting their constituencies, but rather by focusing on and emphasising the core business of the school and the SGB.

It is also clear that educator-governors face many challenges by virtue of being employed in the school. Their role therefore needs to be clarified and be developed more if the SGBs are to function effectively. Although this study focused on educator-governors, the same can be advanced for other SGB component members. Capacity building by way of training is of crucial importance in this regard. This would have to be done in a way that addresses SGB members' real gaps in functional knowledge and expertise as well as governance of schools in a rapidly changing educational milieu.

Conclusion

School governing bodies are by their nature critical structures for the delivery of effective teaching and learning in schools. The various component members thereof need to perform their functions and act their roles in a way that promotes the best interests of the child in school. It is therefore crucial that educators in the SGB discharge their functions in a way that balances their rights while putting forth the needs and best interests of learners. Issue around their interests are adequately catered for in legislation that governs their employment, *inter alia*, the Employment of Educators Act and the Labour Relations

Act as well as various Education Labour Relations Councils' resolutions and structures in the department of education. Therefore, governance should mainly focus on the needs of learners.

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