

In defence of deliberative democracy: challenging less democratic school governing body practices

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One of the major features of the democratisation of education in South Africa revolves around the decentralisation of school governance. In this regard important decision-making responsibilities have devolved from central government to "self-governing" school communities, incorporated into School Governing Bodies (SGBs). The study explores current practices of SGBs in selected schools in the Grassy Park area of the Western Cape. It seeks to demonstrate that a dichotomy appears to exist between the ideals of democratic policies as espoused in the South African Schools Act of 1996 and the manner in which these democratic ideals/policies are interpreted/implemented. The promulgation of the South African Schools Act of 1996 heralded the beginning of a new phase in the governance of schools. However, the mere promulgation of policy does not necessarily imply its effective implementation. It is argued that despite the existence of the South African Schools Act (SASA), school governing practices do not seem to be conclusively democratic. Unless school governing practices are reconceptualised and restructured in accordance with a notion of deliberative democracy, such practices will continue to remain less democratic.

Introduction

The promulgation of the South African Schools Act (Act No. 84 of 1996) had as its aim to "advance the democratic transformation of society" (South African Schools Act, 1996:1). The Act makes provision for democratically elected community-based school governing bodies (SGBs). School governance was in most cases a new terrain for the overwhelming majority of South African communities. Peters (in Aspin, 1995:56) states that "Citizens of a democracy do not simply arrive at political maturity and stand ready, willing and able to run its institutions". Implicit in this statement is the need for training for those governors who are to serve on school governing bodies. For the elected governors to function effectively, they should have a fair understanding of what the principles of democracy entail. Thus, for any structure to function democratically, its participants should have a fair understanding of what democracy is. Participants need to be educated and empowered regarding the principles of democracy.

Moving towards democratic school governance

Embedded in the practice of collective or participatory decision making with regards to educational governance in schools is the notion that school governing bodies (SGBs) need to function according to principles of democracy as espoused in the South African Constitution of 1996. This view is corroborated by Potgieter *et al.* (1997:2), who claim that since 1996 the Republic of South Africa has had a democratic Constitution, which in turn implies that SGBs have to function democratically. The new education system, therefore, encourages community participation. Whereas community participation (in previously disadvantaged schools) was considerably less democratic prior to 1996, it was statutorily changed into bodies that encourage participation, consultation, co-operation and partnership — all features of democratic decision making. Our concern, however, is that it seems as if SGBs in disadvantaged schools do not necessarily adhere to tenets of democracy as emphasised in the South African Constitution and the South African Schools Act of 1996. Problems seem to arise when the Act and its implementation are at variance with each other, that is, the practice of school governance particularly in disadvantaged schools seems to be contrary to what the Act purports. It is in this context that we address the question as to whether SGBs in disadvantaged schools necessarily enact democratic principles as advocated in the Act of 1996. In other words, our investigation aims to clarify and explain what members of SGBs at selected historically disadvantaged schools in the Grassy Park area understand and experience by the notions of democracy, governance, community and transformation. Hendricks (2000:2) claims the following:

For the democratisation of school governance to take place, it should become the preserve of the ordinary lay person. Policies promulgated in the Act create spaces for the application of democratic principles. These spaces need to be filled or utilised with the distinct purpose of contributing towards sound school governance based on the principles as provided in the Act. Participa-

tion in school-based governance has the potential of contributing to the democratic transformation of whole school communities. However, Waghid (2001:1) posits that "... effective policy initiatives driven by functional or instrumental preoccupations are not only conceptually flawed but also deprive education of its wider human purposes".

This presupposes that simply participating in the system of SGBs would not necessarily lead to democratic transformation, as Hendricks claims. On the contrary, there are many variables which impact on SGBs that have to be considered to determine whether their practices contribute towards sustaining the principles of democracy. Although the Act theoretically provides spaces for democratic transformation, it is when the Act has to be transformed into practice that problems seem to arise. This might be because democracy is not an inflexible system with built-in mechanisms to distinguish between "right and wrong". Furthermore, democracy embeds constitutive principles such as participation, community engagement, rationality, consensus, equality and freedom. An understanding of some of these constitutive principles of democracy is essential, because if these principles are undermined in any way, it brings the democratic function into dispute. It is our contention that governors in the five schools do not seem to exhibit an understanding of these principles, thus resulting in less democratic practices.

Constitutive meanings of democratic discourse

Before we proceed with a clarification of the concept "democracy", we first offer some insight into the Act, by drawing from certain sections of the preamble of the Act which have a bearing on this article. Our purpose is twofold: firstly, to become acquainted with this section (certain sections) of the Act, and secondly, to ascertain whether SGB practices are implemented in accordance with the constitutive principles of democracy implicit in the stated policies. In the preamble to Act 84 of 1996 the following is stated:

... (T)his country requires a new national system for schools which will redress past injustices in educational provision, provide an education of progressively high quality for all learners and in so doing lay a strong foundation for the development of all our people's talents and capabilities, advance the democratic transformation of society, combat racism and sexism and all other forms of unfair discrimination and intolerance, contribute to the eradication of poverty and the economic well-being of society, ... and promote the acceptance of responsibility for the organisation, governance and funding of schools in partnership with the State. (South African Schools Act, 1996:1)

Our interest is in advancing "the democratic transformation of society and to combat all forms of unfair discrimination". One of the major intentions of the Act is to advance the concept of democracy and to transform South African society from a racially divided society to a more democratic one. The Act is incessant in its reference to principles of democracy, continually referring to the Constitution and the

Bill of Rights of 1996, and the democratic ethos which inspired the Constitution. We shall now explore the constitutive meanings of democracy, particularly the concepts of freedom, dialogism, power and rationality.

Our focus is on democracy as a sphere for social and political life, which is constituted by the values of positive liberty (freedom of self-development) and political equality (Carr & Hartnett in Waghid, 2001:84). We want to emphasise the notion of democracy, as a sphere for social relationships, for this is precisely what SGBs are about. The different stakeholders serving on SGBs (parents, teachers, learners, non-teaching staff and the principal) invariably relate to one another socially. Social democracy challenges class distinctions and promotes equality of opportunity for all citizens. This understanding of social democracy may arguably include equality in class freedom from racial, ethnic, religious and gender discrimination. Pateman (1979:27), however, sees social democracy as emphasising participation on the grounds of equality and liberty. In this respect it means that people have the right to control their lives, so that they may become competent at self-management and self-governance. It is particularly the reference to self-management and self-governance that informs our understanding of democracy with specific reference to SGBs. Barber argues that a democracy is "about common decision-making and action, about doing things in common, in the absence of truth and in the presence of conflict — even ignorance" (Barber, 1994:44). This statement leads us to conclude that the process of democracy operates within a domain of conflict where common decision-making becomes the rule. If this is the case, consensus is forced into play. The general defining principle of consensus is a sharing that somehow binds. Sharing in this sense refers to a general agreement among the members of a community on fundamental issues which affect them all. Consensus revolves around what is commonly referred to as "the rules of the game", of which the one paramount rule that must precede all others is the one that establishes how conflicts are to be resolved. The claim that in a democracy "we agree to disagree" has its roots in such an understanding of consensus. Disagreement within such rules is the disagreement that democracy protects and furthers. The conflict-solving rule is, therefore, a prerequisite of democracy. It is apparent that consensus is not only an integral part of democracy, but that the system cannot function meaningfully without it. Therefore, democracy needs to create space for criticism and even dissent within the context of consensus or according to the rule of "agree to disagree". In this regard Sartori (1987:92) claims that a dynamic processing of consensus based on the principle that whatever claims to be rightful, or true, must hold its own against, and be revitalised by, criticism and dissent.

In order for democracy to succeed it is imperative that its basic qualities or principles not only be kept intact, but also nurtured. Conversely, a violation or negation of its constitutive meanings would be tantamount to undermining the concept of democracy which could possibly lead to undemocratic practices. Although it is arguably a very difficult task to determine what all these qualities or principles are, for the purposes of this article we explore the concepts of freedom, power, dialogism and rationality, as constitutive features of democracy. In doing so, we shall refer to other relational meanings such as tolerance, deliberation, responsibility and accountability. Our purpose for doing this is directly related to determining whether SGB practices necessarily enact principles of democracy as espoused in the Act.

Freedom

If we say that people are not free to do something, we are suggesting that there is something or somebody that is stopping them. Laws and regulations curtail their options, while they are subjected to a variety of social pressures (Peters, 1973:120). Freedom only prevails if there is a general system of regulation that safeguard against interference from others (Peters, 1973:121). Traditional theories have viewed the democratic form of governance as the condition for human freedom, where this freedom is conceived principally in terms of the liberty of individuals to do as they choose without external constraints (Gould, 1988:31). In terms of this understanding of freedom, democracy is a

system of political rule where freedom is at its utmost and where constraints to reasonably ensure social order prevail by mutual consent. To explain the relationship between "freedom" and "constraint", Birch (1993:96) posits: "The inherent importance of liberty to human beings arises from the fact that they are essentially choosing creatures, constantly taking decisions about how they want to act. The limitations on liberty arise from the fact that human beings are also social creatures, constrained in their choices by all kinds of social pressures." Berlin (in Gould, 1988:35) asserts that: "I am normally said to be free to the degree to which no man or body of men interferes with my activity. Political liberty in this sense is simply the area within which a man can act unobstructed by others." Benn and Peters (in Gould, 1988:35) suggest that, "in general, when we say that a person is free, we mean that, if a person wants to do something, he will not be impeded by some kind of constraint or limitation." The terms liberty and freedom are used interchangeably, giving the impression that they are synonyms. For the purposes of this article, we also use the terms "liberty" and "freedom" as synonyms. Arend (in Birch, 1993:95), however, states that "in a political context the terms are commonly used in slightly different ways, with liberty more likely to be used when the writer means the absence of restraint and freedom more likely to be used when the writer means the opportunity to engage in some activity, such as political participation." Pitkin (in Birch, 1993:95) comments on Berlin's use of these terms as "... liberty when referring to what he called the negative concept of liberty, and freedom when he gave examples of what he called the positive concept of liberty." What is evident in this observation is an understanding that there is a distinct difference between Berlin's negative and positive liberty. Birch (1993:96) elaborates on this interpretation: "On the one hand liberty has been defined as freedom for the individual to do whatever he or she wants to do; in short, that liberty is the absence of restraint. This is the negative concept of liberty. On the other hand, liberty has been asserted to be freedom to do things that are worth doing, to engage in self-development, to have a share of the government of one's society. This is positive liberty." We are more interested in the understanding of Berlin's positive liberty, for it includes the idea of "self-development".

To further expound on the meaning of "self-development", we turn to Gould (1988:32), who argues that the concept of freedom should be understood more broadly than simply entailing the absence of external constraints. She argues "not only for the absence of external constraint, but also for the availability of social and material conditions necessary for the achievement of purposes or plans." She further claims that, although the traditional view of freedom captures an important aspect of what freedom is, it fails to address two key features. Firstly, it ignores the contemporary requirement that the means necessary for the realisation of a choice should be available. By this she means that the social and material means for realising purposes are essential to freedom. She refers to these social and material means as "the enabling conditions" for freedom (Gould, 1988:35). Secondly, it leaves out of consideration the development of a person over time, meaning the realisation of long-term plans. In this way Gould contests the "negative freedom" concept, claiming that a person can only be free if he (she) possesses the requirements, or what she refers to as "enabling conditions", to make a specific choice.

The conception or understanding of freedom as self-development as espoused by Gould is critical to the functioning of SGBs, precisely because this form of governance is new to the South African parent community. Being the majority on the SGB, parents have to adapt to this new role. In fact all the stakeholders, be they parents, teachers or the principal, have acquired the authority (via the Act) to make decisions in an environment which is unfamiliar to them. One cannot presuppose that by serving on the SGB will automatically lead to democratic practices. On the contrary, self-development in Gould's sense is essential to enhance freedom, and with it keep this principle of democracy intact.

Of particular significance to this understanding of freedom, which relates directly to SGBs, is the notion of "co-operative forms of social interaction, access to training and reciprocal recognition of each

other's free agency". "Free agency" in this respect can be linked to the notion of autonomy, where the individual can reach his/her own conclusions. Peters (1973:123) posits that: "Being a chooser is a standard expected of anyone — which is related to norms of rationality ...". He proposes three criteria for autonomy: authenticity, rational reflection and strength of will. Authenticity refers to the individual making rules for him/herself, thus adopting a way of life that is distinct from one being dictated to by others. Rational reflection occurs when the individual is aware of rules and conventions as alterable, continually subject to change. These changes which the individual effects critically, impact on his (her) construction of "a way of life". Strength of will refers to the ability of the individual to stick to one's principles, which have been acquired through rational reflection (Peters, 1973: 123-125). Also implicit in the interpretation of freedom as "co-operative forms of social interaction" is an understanding of power relations, and an adherence to tolerance of opposing points of view, as well as transparency. These conceptions are central to the notion of freedom, and a disregard for any one of them would translate into less freedom. This interpretation of freedom is critical to ensure that SGBs function democratically. Conversely, a disregard for freedom in this sense would inevitably lead to less democratic practices.

Power

Whilst power is analytically a difficult notion, historically and in the history of political thought it is a fairly straightforward one. Power is a political and not an ethical concept. Sartori (1987:28) claims that power is not freedom, for the reason that power is the force and capability to control others. Implicit to such a depiction of power is the idea that force comes into play, when power is used to "control" others. In a democracy, however, using power to control others does not automatically translate into inducing force. The first criterion in the achievement of power should be legitimate attainment. In most cases this legitimate power is realised through free and fair elections. This leads to an understanding that elected representatives gain (political) power in contrast to assuming it. The elected representative is answerable to those who elected him/her. In this regard Sartori (1987: 30) makes the point that: "If he who is elected is not regarded as the representative of those who elect him, the election simply creates, *per se*, an absolute ruler." There is a subsequent linkage between what Sartori refers to as "a normative expectation (that is also, via removability, a sanctionable expectation) of responsiveness and accountability of the person elected to an electorate. This implies that the people as a whole actually wield power. Put differently, if the elected representative misrepresents "the people", mechanisms exist to remove him/her. However, Bobbio (1987:47) claims that the mode in which representatives are representing have a direct bearing on power. He asserts that "the age-old debate on political representation is dominated by at least two issues ... which lead to diametrically opposed political positions. The first issue concerns the powers of the representative, the second what representation involves." We are more interested in the issue concerning power, meaning how the electorate is being represented. Bobbio (1987:47) further argues for two types of representation. We quote his theory at length to clarify this point:

How does A represent B? A can represent B either in the role of a delegate or in the role of "fiduciary". If it is a delegate, A is purely and simply a spokesman, an ambassador, an emissary, a messenger of those he represents, and thus the scope of the mandate is extremely restricted and revocable *ad nutum*. If, on the other hand, A is in the position of a fiduciary, this confers the power to act with a certain independence in the name of and on behalf of those represented.

In the second instance, the elected representative as a fiduciary may use his discretion to interpret the interests of his electorate, meaning that he operates without a binding mandate. Bobbio (1987:47) refers to this as representation without "mandation". Implicit in this interpretation is the fact that the representative has to represent and be answerable to his/her constituency. In terms of the SGB, this seems to be a recipe for conflict, for each representative is almost forced to

"deliver" to his/her own constituency. Bearing in mind that different groups are represented on SGBs, conflict in terms of group interest seems likely. Even though mechanisms for removal because of non-delivery exist, power still remains a means or measure for control. This notion of control, as mentioned earlier, may easily lead to conflict. The issue therefore should not relate to what power is, or who has it, but rather, how it should be utilised. We shall now tease out the implications of this notion with specific reference to SGBs.

School-based decision-making has become the lynchpin in school restructuring efforts in South Africa. Membership to SGBs is predetermined by the South African Schools Act and includes the principal, teachers, non-teaching staff, parents and learners. By bringing these "voices" together, power and influence are distributed to individuals who traditionally had a previously curtailed voice within school governance. It should also be evident that each representative grouping would want to enhance their own interests, which could possibly occur at the expense of another group's interests. It is this type of manoeuvre which leads to the decision-making process becoming an arena of strife, struggle and conflict. The manner in which this conflict is handled fits comfortably into the approach in relation to the utilisation of power. A specific type of power is what Rahim (in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:49) identifies as leadership power. He claims that leadership power is "the ability of one party to change or control the behaviour, attitudes, opinions, objectives, needs and values of another party". French and Raven (in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:49) identify five leadership power bases:

1. Legitimate power — the legitimate right of the leader usually by virtue of the position that the leader holds to prescribe or control behaviour;
2. Coercive power — the leader's control over punishment;
3. Reward power — the leader's control over reward;
4. Expert power — the leader's special knowledge or expertise; and
5. Referent power — the subordinate's desire to identify with the leader.

The school principal (leader) utilises one or more of these power bases to influence subordinates (Johnson & Scollay, 2001:49). The term "subordinates" used in this sense is significant for it assumes degrees of authority. If this is so, then one might reasonably presume that the representative groups serving on SGBs are not equal. Sartori (1987:30) reinforces this understanding when he claims that within any group of people as a whole (for instance, all the representatives on the SGB) some people count more, while others count less. We understand "count" to relate to the individual capacities that each governor brings into the SGB system. If this interpretation makes sense, then the notion of "subordinates" can comfortably fit into the notion of democracy without alarm bells ringing. It would be ridiculous to expect that teachers, learners and parents must all be equal in terms of the skill levels they possess. Rahim (in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:49) found that the utilisation of legitimate, expert and referent power bases was positively associated with compliance, whilst reward and coercive power are associated with resistance. Because resistance is a form of conflict, it stands to reason that the school governors should be in a position to identify the outcomes of the utilisation of the power bases, prior to their (i.e. the outcomes?) utilisation. In this way some forms of conflict can be avoided. It should, however, be noted that principals, by virtue of their position of "leadership power", are not the only source of influence, but that all governing body members should at least have the potential to influence decision-making processes. Each of the representative constituencies on SGBs brings its own basis for influencing decisions.

Continuing with the argument on how power could be utilised to manage conflict, we now use power as the ability to influence others in the social environment of the SGB. This translates into influence on a social level. Social influence is "simply a special instance in causality, namely, the modification of one person's responses by the actions of another" (Cartwright in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:50). Marsden and Friedkin (in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:50) claim that when one has influence, the effect on a decision seems to be without apparent ex-

ertion of force or direct exercise of command. It includes what Lippitt *et al.* (in Johnson & Scollay, 2001:50) refer to as "behavioural contagion", which means involving "the spontaneous pickup or imitation by others ... (persons in the group) of a behaviour initiated by one member, where the initiator did not display any intention of getting the others to do what he did." It also includes what they claim to be "direct influence", where "the actor initiates behaviour which has the manifest objective of affecting the behaviour of another member in the group." It should by now be clear that power or influence is not inextricably linked to force. On the contrary, there are many ways in which power can be positively employed without relating to force. It is this kind of power which should be associated with SGBs practices.

Furthermore, with power comes responsibility. In this regard Morrow (1989:3) posits that "A person can be held neither accountable nor responsible for something which is not under his/her control". Alternatively a person cannot be held responsible for something over which he/she has no power or influence. The Act codifies the power in terms of how SGBs should function. We refer to two examples to show that the responsibility mechanism is directly linked to power. Firstly, every SGB must operate within a binding constitution, thus limiting their sphere of influence and power (South African Schools Act, 1996:9). Secondly, SGB members/governors are legally recognised as juristic persons, meaning they can be sued (SASA, 1996:8). Yet, elected representatives are responsible and answerable to their electorate. This form of "built-in" checks and balances curtails the misuse of power and could act as a deterrent. In this sense it discourages irresponsible representation.

Dialogism

According to Habermas (1987:310), "the furious labour of deconstruction" will have identifiable consequences only when the paradigm of the philosophy of consciousness will be replaced by the paradigm of "mutual understanding", in other words, the paradigm of intersubjectivity. The argument here is for a movement towards symmetry as opposed to asymmetry. The asymmetrical notion of dialogue contradicts the concept of what dialogue actually is, for asymmetry stands for single directional action. What this means is that asymmetry refers to a one-way process in which meaning is transferred. Contrary to this situation, a symmetrical relationship opposes the one-way process and actually emphasises a co-constructive process in which meaning is constructed. For example, verbal interaction presupposes an understanding that there is a speaker and a listener. The speaker might influence the thinking of the listener through what he/she says. If there is no feedback from the listener, this translates into asymmetry, meaning one-way communication or single-directional. If, on the other hand, there is feedback, verbal interaction becomes communication. In this regard the speaker might influence the thinking of the listener and *vice-versa*. This is symmetrical communication or multi-dimensional interaction.

"Mutual understanding" has a bearing on SGBs, especially in terms of its influence or role in democratic practices. Implicit in the concept of mutual understanding is the notion of deliberation. Put differently, one cannot move towards mutual understanding without indulging in what Bohman (1996:23) refers to as "shared practices with others". According to Bohman these shared practices include debate and discussion, which are both inherent principles of deliberation. Only those who can deliberate can maintain self-government although, like direct democracy, the Aristotelian deliberative ideal presupposes a small and homogeneous political community (Bohman, 1996:23). In terms of this ideal as a prerequisite for direct democracy, it can be assumed that an SGB is such a small community, in which deliberation might be possible, notwithstanding the constraint of homogeneity. Bohman further posits that deliberation via the avenue of dialogue with others creates an opportunity for many diverse capacities to be exercised jointly: "Public dialogue is possible, even with those with whom we disagree" (Bohman, 1996:24). Deliberation in this sense is interpersonal; it concerns the process of forming public reason — one that everyone in the process finds acceptable. In other

words, all citizens are equally empowered and authorised to participate in deliberation and reasoning about decisions that affect their lives together (Bohman, 1996:25). It is this understanding of coming to deliberatively agreed upon decisions which is referred to as dialogism.

Furthermore, citizens deliberate in order to find and construct what Scanlon calls "informed, unforced general agreement," or alternatively, what Habermas calls "uncoerced consensus" (Bohman, 1996:26). Fletcha (1999:151) strengthens this interpretation when he posits that "the dialogic approach fosters different people's living together according to rules agreed upon by all through free ... dialogue." In the words of Jones (in Waghid, 2001:99): "Citizens of different ethnic, national and cultural backgrounds can participate in an investigation of one another's acknowledged prejudices (in particular their feelings about the sort of life they want to lead) with the aim of arriving at compromise to which all participants can acquiesce without resentment and which aims at the optimal satisfaction of the conflicting prejudices of all participants." The dialogical process is therefore deliberative, a means of what Bohman (1996:27) refers to as exchanging of reasons for the purpose of resolving problematic situations that cannot be settled without interpersonal coordination and co-operation. The ultimate aim is to reach an agreed means of settling differences. In order to reconcile differences or manage conflict, one is left with the option of either using power claims (including force), or validity claims as a basis for action (Habermas in Fletcha, 1999:153). In essence they must choose between violence and dialogue (Giddens in Fletcha, 1999:153). Giddens additionally argues that power claims impose actions on people, while validity claims seek a consensual basis for action through argumentation, meaning dialogism. In contrast to a relativistic approach which does not differentiate between these two types of claims (because they argue that all claims are generated by power), the dialogic approach rejects power claims and instead promotes validity claims (Fletcha, 1999:154). The dialogic approach works so that people from different ethnic backgrounds can live together in the same educational system, using rules that result from dialogue among them (Fletcha, 1999:154). Concerning multicultural relations, Fletcha (1999:164) identifies three main characteristics of the dialogic perspective, which include equality of differences, sharing territories and radicalisation of democracy. In relation to what is meant by "equality of difference", we quote Fletcha at length.

1. Unlike relativism (post-modern racism), the dialogic perspective emphasises the need for equal rights among ethnicities as well as among diverse social sectors and people;
2. It aims to promote a transformation to principles such as equality and freedom. Under this view, difference is simply part of equality — the equal right of everybody to live differently;
3. The dialogic approach aims for an equal position for all ethnicities, groups and individuals, especially in education; where equality is important in allowing everyone to acquire the competences that allow them to transcend their present societal barriers; and
4. Difference is necessary to promote the maintenance and development of one's own culture and identity, whilst equality is necessary to prevent marginalization and exclusion (Fletcha, 1999:164).

What makes dialogism an acceptable instrument of attaining conciliation? Dialogism generates pluriculturalism (living out your differences) and interculturalism (people share new forms of living and new cultural hybrids) (Fletcha, 1999:166). In other words, dialogism extends and radicalises democratic discourse whereby it is possible for different human beings to share and live together in solidarity, in the sense that individuals want their actions to be directed by the community of which they are members (Waghid, 2001:100). To further corroborate this kind of dialogism, we turn to Jones (1998:150), who argues as follows:

This is not the usual debate about truth and who is right or wrong. It is an attempt to understand others and ourselves as people from different backgrounds and is the basis for a compromise aimed at allowing us to live together as a functioning and unified social

unit rather than as a collection of warring factions living together in geographic proximity.

A point we have alluded to earlier is that SGBs bring together people from different economic, ethnic, religious and social backgrounds. This body is further fragmented into pressure groups (parents, learners and teachers), each advancing their own interest. The consequence of this is that the SGB arena becomes a site of struggle and, in all probability, conflict. If the goal is moving towards harmony and peaceful co-existence, then we suggest that dialogism as a tool for collective action should seriously be considered.

Given the fragmented nature in terms of the composition of SGBs, the adherence to dialogism as a constitutive principle of democracy seems a viable option. In fact, a failure to invoke this dialogic principle might enhance conflict, which could ultimately result in less democratic practices. This could in turn create a situation which might nullify the very reason for the existence of SGBs. We now turn to a discussion of rationality as a constitutive meaning of democracy.

Rationality

Rationality as described by Peters (1998:224) entails engaging (individually) in pursuit of "various differentiated forms of enquiry ... instantiating ... respect for facts and evidence, precision, clarity, rejection of arbitrariness, consistency, and the general determination to get to the bottom of things". Also, rationality is not disconnected from the activities (communal or dialogical) of human beings in relation to each other. It is on the level of human actions that one may conclude that something is rational. Dialogical or communal activities in this regard are "not a contingent arrangement of individual persons", but a practice that creates possibilities for individuals and social groupings to build their patterns of social activities in relation to moral values (Peters in Waghid, 2001:3). Tierney (in Waghid, 2001:65) argues that rationality "constructs our beings and roles in relation to others, over and over again through engagement with others in meaning making. Contained in this understanding of rationality is the recognition that it is a requirement to clarify our reasons for choosing a particular point of view. In another way it means that rationality acknowledges the individual's willingness to express and provide reasons in support of his or her self-interpretations and judgments in a lucid, coherent and logical manner (Waghid, 2001:86). Taylor (1985:137) supports this view when he states that: "Rational articulation seems to involve being able to say clearly what the matter in question is ... (in such a way that) we have a rational grasp of something when we can articulate it, that means, distinguish and lay out the different features of the matter in perspicuous order". One has to supply good reasons in support of one's claims. Habermas reinforces this understanding when he argues that "a politics radically situated in this world should be justifiable on the basis of reason ... " (1997:41). Also embedded in the concept of rationality in quest of attaining the "moral good" (with earlier reference to Peters), are notions such as truth telling, rejection of arbitrariness, impartiality, a sense of relevance, consistency and a respect for evidence and people.

This brings us to a discussion of some of the findings of SGB practices in selected disadvantaged schools in the Western Cape's southern suburbs. We frame our findings in relation to constitutive meanings of democratic discourse as expounded above.

SGB practices in disadvantaged schools in Grassy park/Lotus-River: a case study

We conducted our research in five historically disadvantaged schools in areas where sub-economic houses rented from the local municipality surround all these schools. Most of the houses have outbuildings constructed of zinc and cardboard. Two schools are adjacent to informal housing settlements (squatter camps). The schools are situated in an area where there are many shebeens and where drug merchants are seen as role models because of their seemingly affluent lifestyle. Gangsterism, alcohol and drug abuse are rife. The overall impression is that these communities are extremely poor.

The research included a conceptual study as well as an empirical

section. For the empirical research we conducted 35 semi-structured interviews with governors from the five respective schools. They included the principal, two teacher representatives, two parent representatives of whom one was the chairperson, a non-teaching staff representative and a learner representative from each of the five respective schools. This was followed by informal discussions with parents and other community workers from the surrounding area who have children at these schools. Our purpose was to ascertain whether SGB practices are in accordance with the principles of democracy as argued for, and as determined by, the South African Schools Act (Act 84 of 1996). Put differently, we wanted to ascertain how governors interpret and give meaning to the Act. We interacted with these governors in order to determine their reasons for performing their particular actions (Fay, 1975:71). We therefore worked within the interpretive paradigm. From analysing these data and newspaper reports one may conclude that the region where these schools are located is a dangerous one, where unemployment (we are told) exceeds 50%. The Southern Mail (a local newspaper) reports in a letter to the editor that "even the Grassy Park police will not enter it [the area] during daylight hours. I do not keep a record of murders but I believe it averages two a week" (August 18, 2004). Besides such utterances, our findings suggest that major challenges exist in relation to the way that democracy is practised in these disadvantaged schools. We shall, however, only refer to the findings that directly impact on "democratic governance" in accordance with the principles that we argued for. We shall now explore some of these challenges in relation to democratic discourse.

The lack of training and the constitutive principle of freedom

Firstly, we discuss the issue of a lack of "enabling conditions" for freedom. This is a feature that prevails among all the schools in the case study. All school governors referred to a lack of training, which prevents them from fulfilling their duties effectively. The deficiency in training seems to be at variance with the Act. Under the heading "Enhancement of capacity of governing bodies", the Act states the following:

1. Out of funds appropriated for this purpose by the provincial legislature the Head of Department must establish a programme to:
 - (a) provide introductory training for newly elected governing bodies to enable them to perform their functions; and
 - (b) provide continuing training to governing bodies to promote the effective performance of their functions or to enable them to assume additional functions. (South African Schools Act, 1996:8)

The above provisions are clear, meaning that the onus is on the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) to facilitate the training of school governors, firstly to "enable them to perform their functions" and, secondly, to promote the "effective performance of their functions". Our findings clearly revealed lack of training to be a major deficiency. None of the 35 interviewed, neither the principals (of the respective schools) nor the other 10 governors (who participated in informal discussions), had any formal training (via the WCED) with regard to school governance. Respondents continually referred to "not knowing the rules" (with reference to the Act). A parent representative sums it up: "If you want to play soccer then you must know the rules, so if you are on the SGB you must know the rules. We don't, but we do what the principal wants. All we know is that we must vote and the majority rules".

We argued that "enabling conditions" should be "social conditions" which included access to training and education, without which an individual cannot be "free". This understanding of freedom incorporates a conception of self-development, which is critical for the functioning of SGBs. We previously argued that, in order to keep the principle of democracy intact, "self-development" in Gould's sense is essential to enhance freedom. A lack of training to empower school governors would, therefore, retard this form of self-development. This might lead to less democratic practices. Berlin (in Gould, 1988:39) claims that poverty or a lack of education may render liberty useless. This is the second issue that the research findings expose.

Poverty and freedom

The findings show that these school communities are extremely poor and that governors lack the necessary education levels to enact their roles effectively. It is our contention that the poor economic conditions of these communities have a direct bearing on their capacity to participate in structures that do not bring any significant economic gains. Parent governors at four of the schools alluded to the economic condition within their school communities. One governor sums it up when he claims that "people struggle to feed themselves and all their energy goes into making ends meet. How can people who cannot maintain their own family still be expected to help with the functioning of the school? Even fundraising efforts return poor yields because of the economic conditions in the community". Mr Anderson (a principal) responds by claiming that "people do not do voluntary work anymore. They want to be paid. I can understand that it is because they have no other form of income." Mr Delft (a parent representative) concurs when he explains that "parents would make themselves available if they can earn some money in the process". From our interaction with other community members we received the same response.

In terms of our earlier argument these school governors' possess an "abstract freedom", which could be considered meaningless (Gould, 1988:35). In other words, one cannot expect democratic practices to be enhanced when one does not have access to "real freedom". In fact this form of "pseudo-freedom" may retard democratic practices, an issue which the findings also highlight. We argued that poverty retards movement towards "real freedom", thus creating a semblance of freedom under the guise that the structures for democracy exist, while the capacity to access such structures becomes difficult because of people's socio-economic status.

Representation in democratic practice

Thirdly, we turn to the criterion of representation and its relation to democracy. The thrust of our earlier argument revolves around responsible representation, meaning that the representative (school governor) is answerable to the electorate. The study revealed that there is a break in communication between elected members (of the SGB) and the constituency it represents. This inevitably leads to decisions being taken without a mandate. This initially should not cause major problems as long as the representative is answerable to his/her electorate. Because of the lack of communication between the representative and the electorate, not having a mandate on the part of the representative becomes problematic, leading to less democratic practices. The study showed this to be the case, precisely because the governors of SGBs do not seem to be answerable to their constituencies. Most of the respondents alluded to the problem of conducting meetings. Four of the chairpersons explained that parents are scared to attend meetings because of gangster activity in the region. Mr Anderson and Mr Smith (principals at two of the schools) argue that "it is too dangerous to attend meetings after dark, because you might become a victim of assault or robbery". Mr Anderson laments that, "even the meeting to determine school fees was poorly attended. I had three attempts in conducting this meeting before I had a quorum. Our parent representatives concluded that the parent community is not interested in school governance". At four of the schools they argued that "we have the right to make decisions if the parent community do not respond to notices of meetings to discuss important issues. It is not as if we do not attempt to get a mandate". Two teacher representatives confirmed that "when parents collect their children's progress reports, those who are interested are told of developments". When we asked them whether they tried any other means of communicating with the parent community, the overwhelming response was that the "minutes of the meetings" are available. We then put it to them that they earlier reported that most parents cannot read. Most of the parent representatives responded by claiming "then they should show more interest in their children and make an effort to find out what is happening with their governing body." The findings revealed other problems such as participation, transparency and a misuse of power and authority. On the issue of power, Mr Parker (a principal) explained: "While demo-

cracy is important, I must manipulate the process to get the desired outcome. On quite a few occasions decisions were recorded at SGB level but not implemented because the school management team determines that it is counter-productive, and consequently decides on another course of action". Many teacher representatives complain about the autocratic style of principles. Mr Mullen (teacher representative) sums it up when he claims that "decisions are reached but a day later you find the decision is changed, under the guise of the best interest of the school". Regarding the issue of participation, four of the principals complained that parent and learner representatives seldom speak in meetings. The parent representatives responded (in a distinctive Afrikaans dialect) that meetings are conducted in English and they speak Afrikaans. They concluded by stating that decisions are made by "majority rule". These deficiencies translate into SGB practices becoming less free. Because freedom is a constitutive part of democracy, we have shown how this might lead to less democratic practices.

The question arises: do SGB practices endorse or fail to adjust to democratic principles? From the findings the impression is created that there seems to be a link between poverty and participation. The schools in the case study serve sub-economic communities where unemployment, alcoholism, drug abuse and general violence are endemic. In these schools the surrounding communities have major problems in terms of daily survival. Their main concern seems to be to make ends meet. Under these circumstances it is clear why school managers (principals) find it difficult to secure members of the community to serve on the SGBs. In fact, in most cases individuals alluded to wanting some form of remuneration for serving on the SGB. These inherent living difficulties spill over into the school environment to such an extent that these schools can only charge nominal amounts for school fees. The economic conditions of the community, therefore, have a direct influence on the school's ability to raise funds. Four of the chairpersons explained that parents were reluctant to serve on SGBs because ultimately serving on the SGB translates into raising funds. Teacher representatives at these schools claimed that "the fundraising committee decides on a fund-raising venture then simply pass it on to the staff to organise and implement." In these communities fund-raising is an extra burden, something that these parents can do without. The (in)ability to raise funds, in turn, has a bearing on the capacity of the school to function and compete with other schools in more affluent areas. We contend that the struggle for daily existence plays a role in discouraging members from serving on SGBs. This continuous struggle in effect curtails the freedom of the community, because it ignores the contemporary requirement that the means necessary for the realisation of a choice should be available. If the social and material means are not satisfied, school governors cannot achieve the realisation of their purposes.

In terms of this understanding, it is clear that social and in particular economic conditions are inextricably linked to realising one's purpose, which in this regard is to achieve democratically functioning SGBs. This limitation in the schools that serve their surrounding sub-economic communities has a direct influence on their ability to function according to a type of democratic ethos as explained earlier. Social and economic conditions impact on a poor community's inability to participate in democratic structures. At this point we have to point out that we are not arguing that poor communities do not have the potential to endorse or implement democratic procedures. We are merely interpreting the data, which suggest that these poor communities have less energy to become direct participants in democratic SGB structures. They tend to shy away from participation simply because their energies are geared towards making a daily existence. Notwithstanding the unmanageable economic circumstances of the schools serving a sub-economic community, the Western Cape Education Department (WCED) expects that the disadvantaged schools in the case study must manage and pay the salaries of teachers who substitute for those who apply for "furlough" (accumulated leave). If the schools are not in a position to do so, the individual educator who applied for leave is refused such leave. From a democratic point of view this is

unfair, firstly because the leave is not a privilege but a right in terms of educator conditions of service. Secondly, the educator at the disadvantaged school is actually being penalised for serving in a sub-economic community. It seems as if the government via the WCED is shifting the financial responsibility of educator remuneration (in particular instances) onto communities that cannot afford to assume such a responsibility. Ultimately parent representatives do make themselves available to serve. However, at three of the schools parents agreed that they made themselves available because if they did not do so the school would not have a governing body. They therefore made themselves available so that the situation should not reflect badly on the principal. They claimed that they are not interested in dialogue or debate. What is important to them is that they do what the principal wants because he knows best. In this regard their actions are counter to the principles of dialogue and rational argumentation, which we argued are constitutive principles of democracy.

Lastly, we want to refer to the current practice regarding teacher promotions. Without exception, all five schools fail to comply with the criteria for promotion posts, as espoused in the Act. In this regard the Act states the following:

... (T)he post must be accessible to all who may qualify or are interested in applying for such post(s) ... the filling of educator posts must be non discriminatory and in keeping with the provisions of the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa. (ELRC, 1999:3C-24)

SGB representatives are at pains to explain why they advertise promotion posts, but would only in exceptional circumstances consider an "outside" application, that is, a person from another school. This means that prior to the advertisement there is agreement that only applicants from within the particular school would be considered. This practice in terms of the Act is in direct contravention of the non-discriminatory provision. The practice also seems to be shrouded in secrecy, thus transgressing the transparency provision of the Act. In terms of democratic principles we contend that this form of appointment is less democratic. Unless every applicant has the same chance to participate and secure the promotion post, this practice in fact undermines the basic principles of democracy. Although the argument of a ratio system determining the number of posts a school may have seems to impact on this practice, it does not excuse the practitioners from implementing their own system. We make this claim because the findings show that the post is filled before the advertisement has even been placed. This is, therefore, a move towards nepotism, which could be interpreted as an undemocratic practice. This practice, if exposed, can lead to serious consequences, such as disputes being declared. The SGB is also a legal/juristic person (body), meaning that this practice might potentially lead to costly law suits. A potential critic might argue that governing bodies do not make appointments, and rightly so. However, in most cases the recommendation of the governing body is accepted, meaning the Head of Department (at the WCED) would only in exceptional cases rule against the governing body recommendation. It is our contention that an analysis of the data illustrates that SGB practices are at variance with the concept of democracy. It seems as if SGBs in the disadvantaged communities identified in the study have not yet acquired the skills to adjust their practices towards the type of democratic ethos enunciated in the Act.

Conclusion: in defence of deliberative democracy

We shall now attempt to chart out a way beyond this untenable position by claiming that a more deliberative type of democracy might enhance the chances of more democratic practices to occur in SGBs.

The notion of democracy developed earlier ultimately hinges upon a form of majority rule which does not necessarily advance the notion of deliberation. We contend that deliberation is a necessary condition to ensure more democratic SGB practices. Although we referred to deliberation in our discussion of dialogism, there remain gaps in this understanding. Firstly, participation does not necessarily translate into engagement, meaning that one might participate in a process without actually engaging its participants. Findings from the

study show that in the SGBs parent and learner representatives participate, while their "voices" are seldom heard. They participate without having the opportunity to influence decisions, meaning they are actually excluded from the process. Moreover, we have argued that parent and learner representatives should be afforded the opportunity to actively participate "freely and through reasoned deliberation". Following such a procedure could lead to more democratic practices. Although some of the school managers claim that there is space within their SGBs for a fair exchange of ideas, this does not translate into the "other" being able to influence the decision. The "power concept" comes into play, meaning that in most cases the manager on the SGB, by virtue of his/her position of authority, has the decisive influence. In most cases his/her decision holds sway, because he/she seems to "know best".

Earlier on in the article we made reference to two forms of dialogue as expounded by Habermas, which relate to symmetrical and asymmetrical forms of dialogue. We pointed out the contradiction that might occur through this verbal interaction, which Habermas terms "communication". It is our contention that communication does not necessarily mean dialogue. You may listen to what the other person has to say and even react to what he/she says (symmetrical dialogue), but the communication, which exists in this verbal interplay, might hinge on power. Put differently, the chance exists for the more powerful or the one with more authority to dominate, leading to an acceptance of the dominant view. This might occur irrespective of whether the dominant view is the more rational or plausible argument. We have earlier alluded to the school manager, whose point of view becomes acceptable simply because the myth exists that he/she "knows best". It is this form of communication that we are referring to.

Moreover, it is imperative for school managers to overcome the notion that "he/she knows best", and move towards empowering other school governors in such a way that they become "equals". In essence, this is primarily an ethical issue, meaning that an agreement should follow the general rules and can only be morally binding (valid) if such agreement was achieved through the process of deliberation. To test whether deliberation was actually instituted, such agreement should conform to the following features:

1. Participation in such deliberation is governed by norms of equality and symmetry (all have the same chances to initiate speech acts, to question, to interrogate, and to open debate);
2. All have the right to question the assigned topics of conversation; and
3. All have the right to initiate reflexive arguments about the very rules of the discourse procedure and the way in which they are applied or carried out (Benhabib, 1996:70).

In conforming to the assigned rules, every representative operates within the SGB on the same level as every other representative. In other words, they are equal in terms of their ability to influence decisions. In this way the "power play" inherent in Habermas's understanding of "communication" could arguably be neutralised. Deliberative democracy in this sense can also be correlated to practical rationality, because it potentially leads to a tolerance of or leniency towards new information. Put differently, the deliberative process itself is likely to lead the individual to further critical reflection on his/her already held views and opinions. In other words, one individual cannot possess all the information deemed relevant to a certain decision, which would affect all. Through deliberation, information is sifted and perceived from different perspectives, culminating in a decision which previously might not have been conceived. Conversely, nobody can convince others of his/her point of view without being able to state why, what appears good, plausible, just and expedient to him/her can also be considered so from the standpoint of all involved. Consequently, one might also argue that no outcome or decision would forever remain fixed, permanent or rigid; on the contrary it should always be open to revision or re-examination. One, however, needs to take cognisance of the warning that deliberation, though a necessary condition, is not a sufficient condition for practical rationality, because it can be misinterpreted, misapplied or even abused.

We now address the issue of majority rule as the last gap that we have identified in relation to dialogue. In relation to the appointment of teachers, our interaction with school governors suggests that most appointments are finalised by means of a vote, meaning majority rule. In fact in one school the school manager was appalled by an outcome which was arrived at in this manner. Interpreting this situation after hearing his story leads us to understand that majority rule does not necessarily lead to the desired outcome. In our reading of Benhabib, we find that in many instances majority rule is a fair and sometimes rational procedure to formulate a decision, not because legitimacy resides in numbers, but because if a majority is convinced, and there is no other means of overcoming an impasse, democracy relies on this procedure. So in the absence of consensus, a majority decision-making procedure does not seem inappropriate. It is, however, our contention that problems seem to occur when the voting is not preceded by reasoned discussion and debate, thus undermining the procedure of rationality, which we hold is a constitutive principle of democracy. Benhabib (1996:72) reinforces this understanding when she argues that the "deliberative discourse model makes provisions against its own misuses and abuses in that the reflexivity condition built into the model allows abuses and misapplications ... to be challenged. No outcome is *prima facie* fixed but can be revised and be subjected to re-examination." This statement also reinforces the previous warning that the constitutive principle of practical rationality within the deliberative discourse is open to misinterpretation, misapplication and abuse.

This leads us to conclude that a majority decision is valid, but space should exist to challenge such a decision. The majority decision remains valid only until it can be challenged by good reasons and rational debate. Implementing such a procedure when teacher appointments are considered might be problematic for the "challenge" should occur prior to a permanent appointment being effected. This problem might be minimised if reasoned arguments (rational debates) are produced in determining why a representative votes for a particular candidate. This does not seem implausible if one considers that such a procedure could potentially overcome the burden of staff dissatisfaction, which the manager at one school alluded to. Habermas (1997: 47) supports this interpretation when he posits that "A majority decision may come about only in such a way that its content is regarded as the rationally motivated but fallible result of an attempt to determine what is right through a discussion that has been brought to a provisional close under the pressure to decide". Rationality in this sense, therefore, precedes majority rule where the decision arrived at remains regarded as fallible, meaning that there is space for re-examination or revision. Because the decision was made under pressure and the majority rule procedure was implemented simply to overcome an impasse, it therefore remains provisional. Again this leads us to understand that the decision is open to future challenge if, and when, reasoned arguments become available to contest the earlier achieved outcome. Majority rule within a deliberative discourse should, therefore, be interpreted as a temporary procedure only to be implemented in the face of an impasse. The initial aim should be a movement towards a deliberative form of consensus. The majority decision is therefore a conditional consensus, meaning the consent of the minority to a practice that conforms to the will of the majority. This does not translate into the minority, by resigning their will, therefore declaring their opinion to be incorrect, nor does it require the minority to abandon their aims, but rather that they forego the practical application of their convictions, until they succeed in better establishing their reasons, thus convincing the majority to move towards their point of view. The deliberative understanding of majority rule does not coincide with majority rule as currently practised within the domain of the identified SGBs. Majority rule as currently practiced seems, therefore, to be less democratic. We contend that to move towards more democratic practices, the majority rule concept should be applied in the sense argued for, meaning the incorporation of deliberative discourse as an inherent aspect of the procedure. Deliberation in this sense creates a potential way out of the currently accepted implementation of majority rule, with its winner takes all scenario. In fact, it is our

contention that the deliberative discourse model could be applied to potentially ensure that SGBs in previously disadvantaged communities function in such a way that they endorse the principles of democracy as espoused by the Act.

Finally, the notion of democratic school governance this article proposes is one grounded in meanings related to deliberation, concern for the other, recognition of unheard voices, and inclusion at all levels of participation on the part of governing body members. Our case study has hopefully raised important concerns about current weaknesses in the implementation of policy matters in relation to democratic governance. Unless policy on governance is implemented together with a serious commitment to nurturing the innate capacities of SGB members, democratic governance has little chance of being realised in post-apartheid disadvantaged schools.

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