

## Section twenty-one status and school governing bodies in rural schools

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Awarding section twenty-one status to schools in South Africa was hailed as a significant milestone towards the democratisation and functioning of schools in South Africa. The purpose of the study was to examine the influence on the school governing bodies in rural schools of the allocation of the section twenty functions by the provincial government's member of the Executive Committee (MEC). A case study involving three types of schools, for instance a moving school, a stationary school as well as a promenading school, was conducted in Bushbuckridge. It emerged from the findings of the case study that many SGBs were not coping with the functions thrust upon them because of lack of skills and involvement. As a result the bulk of the duties and responsibilities that they are supposed to carry out are performed by the principals and educators.

### Artikel 21-status en die beheerliggame van plattelandse skole

Die toekenning van artikel 21-status aan skole in Suid-Afrika is beskou as 'n belangrike stap in die proses van demokratisering en verbetering van skole. Die doel van die navorsing was om die invloed op die funksionering van beheerliggame in plattelandse skole te bepaal ten opsigte van die toekenning van artikel 21-funksies aan die skole deur die lid van die provinsiale regering se Uitvoerende Raad (LUR). Drie tipes skole, naamlik 'n stagnerende skool, 'n statiese skool en 'n ontwikkelende skool in die Bushbuckridge-gebied in Mpumalanga was deel van die gevallestudie. Uit die navorsing is dit duidelik dat die beheerliggame moeite ondervind om die funksies uit te voer weens 'n gebrek aan vaardighede en betrokkenheid. Die gevolg is dat die meeste van die funksies steeds deur die hoof of onderwysers verrig moet word.

According to the South African Schools' Act (SASA), section (16) (1), the governance of every public school is vested in its governing body and the principal with the academic staff is responsible for the professional management of the school (RSA 1996: section 9), which are the daily activities of the school (RSA 1996 section 19, Heystek 2003: 332). Heystek (2003) and Sallis (1995) stress that the school governing body (SGB) is not supposed to be involved in professional management activities such as decisions about learning material and which teaching method or class assessment should be used, even when the SGB is paying the salary of the staff member.

The functions of the SGB is stipulated in two specific sections, namely SASA section 20 and 21. All governing bodies must perform the section 20 functions while the section 21 functions are allocated to specific governing bodies, or may be "earned" by a specific governing body. There are two methods in which the section 21 functions may be allocated to a SGB, namely by application to the head of the provincial department of education when they can prove they have the capacity to perform these functions (SASA section 21(1)), or it may be bestowed on a SGB by the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) in the province when the MEC is satisfied that the SGB has the capacity to perform these functions (SASA section 21(6)). These allocation methods will be discussed in more detail later in the article.

This article will focus on the allocation of the section 21 functions to governing bodies and how these governing bodies experience the particular functions in terms of improving their schools. The schools in this case study are typical rural schools in South Africa with limited resources and the parents may be illiterate or semi-illiterate with a low income, if they have any monthly income. The allocation of the section 21 functions is still in the early stages for most rural schools, hence it is difficult to determine or assess the applicability and effectiveness of these functions, but an early assessment is important to determine the possible influence on schools in rural areas. The first schools to attain section 21 status were the former model C schools which were awarded the status after the promulgation of the South African Schools Act in 1996. The rest of the schools were awarded section 21 status in the year 2003 after the Minister of Education had passed a resolution to give all schools in Mpumalanga section 21 status (Mpumalanga Dept of Edu-

cation, Circular no 5 of 2003, 20 January 2003). The aim is therefore to determine the perspective of the SGB members on the influence of the allocation of the section 21 functions and not so much on the effectiveness or influence, because it is still too early after the section 21 allocations to determine the impact of the change.

The allocation of the section 21 functions by the MEC creates larger numbers of schools with these functions, which will have financial implications for the provincial departments of education as well as for the schools. According to SASA section 20 1(a) SGBs must promote the best interests of the school and strive to ensure its development through the provision of quality education for all learners at the school; and according to section 20 1 (e) they support the principal, educators and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions. Hence one of the aims of the governing bodies is to improve schools in terms of teaching and learning. The recent allocation of section 21 functions by MECs in different provinces must therefore be seen as part of an effort by the government to empower SGBs to improve schools. This recent development in school governance is important for research, because previous research in this field only had schools with section 20 functions as their focus as most of the research was done in the previous black schools and the bare minimum in this category applied for section 21 status. The ministerial committee on the review of school governing bodies (Dept of Education 2004) could not really comment about the influence of the section 21 functions because it was only introduced during the year the report was completed. This article follows the aims of this report to enquire about the role of the governing bodies in school improvement and more effective teaching and learning (Dept of Education 2004: vi).

## 1. Section 20 and 21 functions

The governance structure of schools is part of the process to enhance democracy in the country. All the members of the different constituencies are elected every three years. The section 20 functions incorporate the following:

1 Cf BT 2004, Heystek 2003, 2004, Bush 2005, Bembe 2004, Looyen 2002, Karlsson *et al* 2001.

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- (a) and (e) promote the best interests of the school, provide quality education for all learners at the school, and support the principal, educators and other staff of the school in the performance of their professional functions;
- (b), (d) and (c) adopt a constitution and a code of conduct for learners at the school and develop the mission statement of the school;
- (f) determine times of the school day;
- (g) administer and control the school's property and the buildings and grounds occupied by the school, as well as allowing the reasonable use under fair conditions of the facilities of the school for educational programmes not conducted by the school, and allowing the reasonable use of the facilities of the school for community, social and school fund-raising purposes;
- (h) encourage parents, learners, educators and other staff at the school to render voluntary services to the school;
- (i) and (j) recommend to the Head of Department the appointment of educators and non-educators at the school.

The section 21 functions incorporate the following:

- (a) to maintain and improve the school's property, and buildings and grounds occupied by the school, including school hostels, if applicable;
- (b) to determine the extramural curriculum of the school and the choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy;
- (c) to purchase textbooks, educational materials or equipment for the school;
- (d) to pay for services to the school.

The section 21 functions have more financial implications for schools, because they must have sufficient funds to perform these functions positively. By allocating these functions to schools by decree the government encourages schools to be more financially independent and self-reliant.

The aforementioned functions are conditional on the governing body having the capacity to perform such functions (RSA 1996: section 21). The section 21 functions seemed to be very important and will grant schools certain status in the community if the school is able to secure section 21 functions, hence the reference to section 21 "status". The following words and concepts in section 21 of SASA create the impression that these functions are something special: SGB *may apply* for the functions; the head of the department *may refuse an application*; the allocation may be *conditionally* (our italics, JH & MN).

Performing these functions are problematic as SGBs in rural areas and less disadvantaged urban areas do not have the required skills and experience to exercise their new powers and may have difficulty fulfilling their functions (Motala & Pampallis 2001: 153, Van Wyk 2004: 50, Dept of Education 2004:11).

Despite the good intentions by government to increase democratic participation in decision-making and create an equitable education system, this could remain an unachievable goal in rural areas and other marginalised communities (Motala & Pampallis 2001: 165). This could happen because effective participation in SGB activities requires skills such as drafting and managing a budget, and the ability to read and understand as well as implement the legislation and policies (Heystek 2003: 335). Karlsson (2002: 332) stresses that despite being the majority in the SGB, parents are reticent and they rely on the principal and educators for leadership and guidance in decision-making. The review report on school governance (Dept of Education 2004) emphasises the importance of the role which governing bodies are supposed to play in South Africa. Thus, the aim of the research was to determine how SGBs in rural public schools accepted and experienced the responsibilities associated with section 21 status, and the possible impact this had on the functioning of SGBs in these areas within the new democratic dispensation. The research question therefore is: How do SGBs in rural areas experience their new section 21 status?

## 2. School governing bodies and section 21 functions

The structure of governance and school governing bodies is part of a worldwide trend towards more self-managing schools. This is according to theories about centralisation and decentralisation with the related power play between different role players (Dalin 2005:5), and forms the background to understanding the power play in the allocation of section 21 functions, but the departments of education retain the centralised power with restrictive legislation within which the SGBs must function.

The decentralisation provides the governing bodies with potential power which they may exploit for their own agendas (Sayed & Soudien 2005: 115). Motala & Pampallis (2001: 144) warn that the section 21 functions present a real danger in the newly decentralised South African school system, because although school governing bodies have been given

considerable powers, a lot of them lack the necessary skills to exercise their new powers effectively. This was already stated by Heystek & Paquette (1999: 191) who reiterate that neither parents nor educators in South Africa have had much experience of participatory decision-making, since in the past principals were generally considered to be the only people with the knowledge and authority to make decisions. The Department of Education (2000: 42) and Heystek (2004: 7) also acknowledge that the idea of allocating more powers to schools could be problematic in areas where there are high rates of adult illiteracy. Parents may not be able to play a meaningful role in school governance because of lack of understanding and interpretation of legislation and education policies. Mathonsi (2004: 20) strongly argues that while the new policy requires governors and managers to work in democratic and participatory ways to build relationships and ensure efficient and effective delivery of educational goals, the translation of the policy into practice remains a mammoth challenge, because “poor communities tend to lack access, resources, information or organisational skills to appropriately influence decisions about education or other social services”.

The concepts of status and powers linked to the section 21 functions are somewhat questionable. Power is the ability to influence individuals or a situation (Schultz 2003). Related to power are the influence and the authority in a certain position (Harris *et al* 2003: 22). Regarding the power related to section 21 functions, the following serves as background. The first schools applying and obtaining the section 21 functions after 1994 were predominantly the previous “white” schools (referred to as model C schools). These schools had schools fees even before 1994 and in general the white parents had better incomes than other parents in the country. Most of the time these schools were well-equipped, with many facilities bought from school fees paid by parents. These model C schools could also appoint more educators than the official allocation from the department from the school fees. The status and power related to the section 21 functions therefore corresponded with the financial and human skills resources available in the former model C schools. This may be the reason why the section 21 functions are perceived as “powers and a status”, rather than normal functions. What most of the rural schools do not realise, is that they must have sufficient funds to be able to use these powers and status to their advantage. The authors are not sure that the perceived section 21 powers (func-

tions) are actually empowering the SGBs in schools with low school fees. To benefit from the power and status of section 21 functions requires sufficient funds. Without adequate funding the decision-making “powers” do not really mean anything. To be able to maintain or even improve the school’s facilities and grounds, a school needs capital. To determine the extramural curriculum is easy, but to put it into practice and actually practise and participate in these activities, financial means have to be available. It is difficult to see what the status or “power” is in the function of purchasing textbooks and learning material. To pay for services at a school is a burden rather than an advantage; hence there is limited power in the section 21 functions. It is especially burdensome for rural schools and schools in lower income areas. The only schools that gain some status from the section 21 functions are the richer schools where their superior financial situation provides some status.

It is against this background that our research set out to determine how SGBs in rural areas experience their newly allocated section 21 functions. In the rural areas, there are normally bigger shortages of skills amongst parental SGB members. This article therefore aims to determine the feasibility and implications of the allocation of these new section 21 powers to SGBs on education delivery in rural schools.

### 3.1 Allocating section 21 functions

Karlsson (2002: 330) states that the powers and functions of governing bodies fall into two categories, namely policy and financial functions, thereby enabling SGBs to have different levels of participation in school affairs. These section 20 functions have the potential to provide governing bodies with some “power”, for example by determining the language, religion and language policy of a school. This might be more “powerful” functions, but these policies must comply with all national and provincial legislation which might be restrictive on a governing body. For example, a governing body cannot knowingly discriminate against learners with a specific language which only accept (for example) Afrikaans as the only medium of instruction in a school. These section 20 policy powers might be seen as potentially meaningful by certain governing bodies, but the section 21 functions are a financial burden rather than a form of power and status.

Shortly after 1994, most of the formerly “black” schools did not apply to become section 21 schools, because they do not have the ability and funds to benefit from the section 21 functions. These schools normally have a small income from the compulsory school fees, which are in the order of R20 to R500 per child per year.

According to SASA section 21(1), School Governing Bodies that feel they have the necessary knowledge, capabilities and experience may apply to the provincial Head of Department to obtain section 21 functions. The Head of Department can, after careful examination, approve or disapprove the application. This is called “earning” the functions. These SGBs must be able and capable to perform the extra functions.

Another method of acquiring the section 21 status is that the Member of the Executive Council (MEC) in the province may, by means of a notice in the Provincial Gazette, determine that some governing bodies may exercise one or more functions, without having to apply to the Head of Department if the MEC is satisfied that the governing bodies concerned have the capacity to perform such functions effectively, and there is a reasonable and equitable basis for doing so (RSA 1996: section 21(6)). The procedure and process followed in this allocation of the section 21(6) functions by the MEC may be problematic and questionable. The Mpumalanga Minister of Education passed a resolution in 2002 awarding all schools in Mpumalanga section 21 status. In 2003 the department distributed forms to all schools compelling them to apply for section 21 status. Without even waiting for the responses, the schools were awarded the section 21 status. A confusing aspect for principals in the allocation of these section 21 functions is the fact that although the certificates given to schools indicate that schools have also been awarded the function to buy textbooks and other stationery, this function has been retained by the provincial government, as it continues to buy and supply stationery and textbooks to schools. Another astounding aspect is the fact that the schools were compelled to apply for the section 21 status, although a resolution had already been passed to award schools the status. In following this procedure it is questionable if the department determined whether the SGBs have the capacity to perform these functions, or whether there is any reasonable and equitable reason for believing that the SGBs do have these skills.

According to the principals in the sampled schools, the Limpopo Provincial Department of Education distributed a circular encouraging



schools to apply for section 21 status. Minutes of the SGB and the previous year's audited financial statements must be included in the applications. All schools that did so were awarded the section 21 "status". However, the question remains as to whether the schools awarded the functions fulfil all the other requirements pertaining to section 21 status.

### 3.2 Why award section 21 powers to schools?

The concept of awarding section 20 and 21 powers to School Governing Bodies (SGBs) in schools in South Africa originates from the government's intention to entrench democracy, unity, non-discrimination, redress, equity and equality (Squelch 2000: 137). It is a way of redressing the historic imbalances created by the apartheid ideology in educational provision (Davies 1999: 13). Proponents of decentralisation believe that the transfer of these powers or functions to the local school enhances participation and accountability, leading to a healthier and stronger relationship between schools and communities, and providing an alternative form of accountability to bureaucratic surveillance (Gamage 1994: 45-6). Van Wyk (2004: 49) stresses that "when educators and communities collaborate in making important decisions about educational alternatives, a true mutual responsibility will grow". According to Parker & Leithwood (2000: 38) this will ensure improvement in schools. Proponents of decentralisation also believe that it generates resources and results in improvement of their allocation (Sayed 2002: 36). In the South African context, awarding section 21 functions will not automatically generate resources and improvement, especially not in the short term.

Most of the former white schools requested and received section 21 status soon after the promulgation of the South African Schools Act. The reason behind this was financially and politically motivated. The reason was that these schools had experience in this form of management and governance before 1994. Since 1992 the former model C schools had incomes from the compulsory school fees in the order of R500 to R8 000 per child per year. The government also saw it as an opportunity where the former white schools could take major responsibilities for their own expenses, rather than depending on the state for funds related to school facilities and for purchasing books and other learning and support material. This is in line with the argument of Karlsson

(2002) who argues that the white government allocated model C status to the white schools to make them financially independent to lessen the financial burden on the state.

Currently the government uses the financial argument to limit their financial responsibility to support the former white schools, which are in most situations situated in better socio-economic areas than the previous black schools. It is financially advantageous for the state if a school wants the section 21 functions. Although the state does give schools an amount of money for these purposes, it is not sufficient, especially for the former white schools. The following is an actual example of a secondary model C school in Gauteng (currently a multicultural school with 50% black learners). This school is not part of the case study for the research. The amount allocated by the state according to the financial models, was R15 276 in 2004. From this allocation R8 745 would be for municipal services (water and electricity), while this school's expenses for water and electricity amounts to R31 722 per month. Another example is a black primary school in Mpumalanga. The state's contribution to the school in 2004 was R106 923, which included the learning support material as well as daily maintenance, municipal services, office stationery, necessities, media collection, toiletries and cleaning material and telephone accounts. According to this school's reconciliation financial statement for the year 2004, there expenditure for municipal services was R31 722.68 and office stationery was R33 605.24. They must secure additional funds if they want to purchase more facilities than provided for by the state. This makes it advantageous for the state when schools applied or are allocated section 21 functions, because school communities bear the financial responsibility which is supposed to be carried by the state, as part of its welfare responsibility to provide equal education opportunities for all children (Schneider 2003, Streak 2004).

For many traditional black schools, the allocations for municipal services put them at an advantage, because they usually do not have these services. As a result, the money gets shifted to another needy budget post through verimentation. Some schools do not even have electricity and consequently they use the money for something else.

### 3. Research design

The research approach for this study was qualitative and it involved a case study of three schools called school A, B and C. The qualitative approach was deemed most suitable for the study, because it allowed the researcher to analyse concrete cases of the SGB members, principals and all other participants in the study in their temporal and local particularity, starting from their expressions and activities (Flick 1998: 13). As the intention of the study was also to observe the interactions and the attitudes of the participants, the qualitative approach came in handy as the researcher was able to probe in order to uncover reasons for actions (Morgan 1993: 47).

The research was conducted in Bushbuckridge in the Bohlabela Region in the Limpopo province. The area was devastated by uprisings and violence after the 1994 elections as people demanded to be governed by the Mpumalanga province whose capital is a short distance away from them. Bushbuckridge is rural and it is one of the most disadvantaged areas in South Africa. The illiteracy rate amongst parents is quite high, especially with the migration of former refugees from Mozambique. Unemployment is also high and parents who are lucky enough to have secured employment, have to work far from their homes and children, with the result that they are unable to come home daily. This deprived setting relates to many schools in the country, and although this is a case study, the data and implications from the research may be applicable in many areas of the country.

The schools were chosen through purposive or judgemental sampling. Although the initial idea was to involve a departmental official, this did not materialise, because the departmental official concerned could not assist me. She did not know schools well enough, as she had only been appointed in the area a short time ago. This situation forced the researchers to select the schools from the region where they were based, irrespective of whether the school was a secondary or a primary school. Hence the study consisted of one primary school (A) and two secondary schools (B and C).

The respondents were selected because they were the most likely to supply the required information and were willing to share it (Singleton *et al* 1993:160). The participants in the case study at school level were three parent SGB members (the chairperson, treasurer and any other

readily available member) two educator SGB members and the principal from each school. The chairperson and the treasurer were selected because they handle the finances and work closely with the principal. They were also more likely to have influence and would probably be more informed about projects at the school and the way the SGB functions. The other parent member was selected because parent members are in the majority in the SGB and the researcher needed to determine whether other parent members, apart from the executive committee members, know what is happening in the SGB.

The educator SGB members were selected for reasons similar to those applying to the third parental member. However, the educators were likely to provide more information on the effectiveness of the SGB, because the educators know and experience the effectiveness of SGB's functionality. They spend most of their time at the school and they implement the policies of the SGB. The study also involved one departmental official (section 21 co-ordinator) and a member of the National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB). The data collection strategies utilised in the case study were focus group interviews with the parental representatives as a group per school, and educator groups as well as individual in-depth interviews with principals, and non-participant observation while visiting the schools for the interviews.

Reliability and validity or trustworthiness (De Vos 2001: 331) of the study were ensured through triangulation or various methods of data collection (focus group interviews, individual in-depth interviews and non-participant observation). Interviewing the three role players separately assisted in the trustworthiness of the data. Interviewing the various stakeholders in education also assisted in lending credibility to the study. Although this was difficult because of the distance between the researcher and the participants, the researcher also engaged in member checking and participant review, asking the participants to review the researcher's synthesis of the interviews for accuracy of the representation of the given data (McMillan 387: 1993).

The qualitative data collected consisted of interview transcripts of the participants and the notes of observations made during visits to the schools. The data was analysed in accordance with Mouton (2001), McMillan (1993) and Glesne (1999) who agree that data analysis involves breaking the data into manageable themes, patterns, trends and

relationships. The interview transcripts and the data obtained through participant observations were read over and over again and then grouped into themes, which were subsequently clustered into categories. Comparisons across the categories were made in order to discover connections between the themes.

## 4. Findings

### 4.1 Educational background of SGB members and their role in drafting policies

The level of education is a fundamental aspect in developing the wide range of skills and capacity that one needs in order to deal with the complex issues and functions SGBs are expected to fulfil (Van Wyk 2004: 54). It is therefore important to determine the educational background of the SGB members to serve as an indication if their educational level may have an influence on their actual and active participation in SGB activities. Table 1 indicates the qualifications of the parent SGB members. The parents have the minimum literacy skills to read the policies, but more skills than just reading are needed to draft a policy for the local school based on all the applicable legislation and policies. The interviews in schools B and C were conducted in Xitsonga and Sepedi because the parents were not fluent in English. This was an indication that the parents would find it difficult to understand the policies and would depend on the principals and educators for the detail and interpretation before being able to make a contribution.

Most of these parental governing body members did not participate in drafting the school policies. The principals and educators said they drew up most of the policies. The reason for the limited involvement of the parents is twofold. The departmental working procedures sometimes demanded the policies at short notice, which ruled out parental participation, because they may be at work and cannot attend meetings at short notice. Secondly, there is a lack of knowledge and skills on the side of the parent SGB members which prevent them from being actively involved on drafting policies. Principals indicated that even some educators find it very difficult to draft policies because they have never been involved in financial management. This implied that the principals did most of the policy drafting. It must be noted that even the principals

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Table 1: Educational background and experience of SGB members

School type	Capacity	Educational background	Experience (terms served in the SGB)
School A	Principal	Senior Primary Teachers' Diploma, FDE (Educational Management) Bachelor of Education	Third term
	Chairperson	B Ed	Second term
	Treasurer	Senior Teachers' Diploma & Bachelor of Education	Second term (five years)
	Educators	1 Higher Diploma in Education, (HDE) 2 Primary Teachers' Diploma	Third term First term
School B	Principal	Bachelor of Education	Third term
	Chairperson	Standard 6	Second term (five years)
	Treasurer	Standard 10 & Clerical Certificate	Seven years (has now left)
	Other parent	Standard ten	One term
School C	Principal	BA PAED	Third term
	Chairperson	Standard 10 & Certificate in Building	Second terms (five years)
	Treasurer	Standard 7	One term (two years)
	Other parent	Standard 10	One term (two years)

had limited training or knowledge about financial management. Until 1994 principals in the former black schools were not exposed to financial management because the government managed the school's financial responsibilities. Only one principal had management training which might have included financial management. This makes even the principals novices in financial management. Often the full SGB approves the drafts without questioning or changing anything.

This level of participation, especially from the parental component in the SGB, raises questions about the true democratic process and the value of their participation. This limited participation might be a form of participative democracy, but does it really contribute to the democratisation of the society? Although no SGB meetings were observed,

the participants indicated that there are low levels of participation from members in the SGB meetings, especially when drafting policies and budgets. Lewis & Naidoo's (2004: 5) study of participation in SGB activities revealed that participation by parents in governance is individualistic and sporadic and it depends almost entirely on the good grace of principals or the initiative of individual parents who may, or may not have the power to challenge existing patterns of participation. They further emphasise that this participation is limited to certain issues determined by the principal or the parent member serving as the chairperson. They concluded that in general, parents are not involved in broad policy-making (Lewis & Naidoo 2004: 5). The added expectations for section 21 SGBs reduced the parental involvement further because of the extended demands for more detailed financial management.

#### 4.2 SGBs' understanding of a section 21 school

SGB members must understand the challenges and duties associated with section 21 functions. For this purpose a series of meetings were supposed to be organised by the provincial department of education to inform and train the stakeholders about what was expected of them when the school attained section 21 status. However, during the interviews it was clearly established that insufficient consultation took place in order to explain what a section 21 school is and what the expected roles of the members would be. This is expressed very clearly by an educator from school A who responded as follows:

This is coming to me for the first time; I do not know how they transferred the school to being a section 21 because we have never been told about this, we have only been told that we have been allocated R2200-00 but the meaning of section 21 no, we were not told.

Educators from the other schools echoed the same sentiments. Parent SGB members appeared to have a better understanding than their educators of what a section 21 school is. However, most of them could not articulate which functions had been allocated to them, except for the chairperson of school A (who has a postgraduate qualification) who indicated that "we have been giving all functions except the one of purchasing textbooks and other educational material needing higher amounts of money". This is similar to what Van Wyk (2004: 51) found, namely that educators were sidelined in making decisions, as consultations seemed to

have taken place between the parent members of the SGB and the principals about this issue. This also has implications for the department's vision of improving the democratic process. The governing body structures have the potential to develop thousands of people who may use these skills in their communities. This potential can only be released if the governing bodies are actively involved and receive continuous training.

#### 4.3 Perspectives of the acquisition of section 21 status on SGB activities

According to Heystek (2004:12) the initial idea of granting section 21 status was to delegate more authority and economic responsibility to local school level. The section 21 co-ordinator interviewed agreed that this was done in order to encourage schools to be independent and self-reliant. In her own words she said:

We are trying to eliminate the movement that schools engage in if they are not section 21, because if they are not they buy through the department. This is a long process but we are trying to say that schools should buy for themselves and once they are awarded these functions they are able to do this without the department as the money is deposited directly into the schools' accounts.

Being a section 21 school limits the interaction between schools and the department, as well as the dependency of the school on the department. This places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the SGB in terms of its *modus operandi*. Budget management functions including telephone bills, municipal services and supplementary items are now the responsibility of the SGB. This process of allocating section 21 functions to schools provides the department of education with an opportunity to save on its own spending, because they can redeploy the staff members who were working with the school's budgets to other sections in the department, for example to the curriculum section to assist with the new curriculum development. However, the parents responsible for the financial management are not always available when needed at school. Therefore, educators or rather the principal, fulfils the bulk of the tasks, especially because not all sampled schools had support staff like administrative clerks.

The principals and parent SGB members agreed that the acquisition of section 21 powers has improved their work ethic and sense of commitment because if "we do not do this, the status might be with-



drawn and whatever gains we have made will come to zero” as put by one of the principals. The chairperson of school A reiterates:

The acquisition of section 21 status really changed the attitude and the functioning of the school and the SGB in particular because if you know that you are to make submissions and take your books for financial auditing, obviously you will make it a point that everything is done properly.

However, educators indicated that they did not see any change, except that they were informed that money has been deposited into their school account by the department of education. This stems from the fact that educators are rarely informed or consulted about decisions concerning SGB activities. Some educators even mentioned that they were sometimes not even aware of parents’ meetings that were held at their schools. Participation and democratic process may again be lacking. Why are the educators not involved? It might either be a lack of training on the part of the chairpersons, or the principals who are doing the actual financial management do not want the educators to be involved. Nonetheless, it is not according to the stated participative and democratic vision of the department.

Although the financial directives from the Department of Education emphasise the importance of the availability of a finance committee with a financial policy, all three schools in the study lacked financial committees and policies. Although one of the principals in the study claimed to have these in place, his claim could not be substantiated as educators and the parental members in the SGB negated this. This situation in schools supports the perception that the departments “forced” the schools to accept section 21 status without ensuring that the governing bodies have the ability, structures and experience to perform the functions.

#### 4.4 Transparency in financial matters of the school

The paradigm shift in South Africa to an open, participative and democratic country requires transparency and information-sharing in order to build trust, tolerance and co-operation. This implies that the audited financial statements of the school be circulated to the members of the school community for perusal so that members can see and understand how the school’s finances have been utilised. Bischoff (1997: 53) main-

tains that this should be done irrespective of whether the information is pleasant or unpleasant. The availability of budgets and financial statements for perusal and comment by the school community entrenches democracy (Davidoff & Lazarus 1997: 120).

Of the three schools in the study, only school A was able to display its audited financial statement to all members of the community. Only parents were shown the financial statement in school B. Educators at the school indicated that they were not even aware of the meetings, hence they did not bother to attend, especially because such meetings happen when schools are closed. Educators at the school stressed that they are not involved in budgetary issues and the principal who writes it on the board on the day of the meeting usually presents the financial statement. This did not give the parents sufficient time to interrogate the statement. This has prompted the parents to request that the financial statement be typed and distributed to all parents in good time.

In school C the principal indicated that the majority of the parents at a meeting accepted the financial statement. This was disputed by both parent and educator SGB members. The chairperson stated:

The principal took the financial books for auditing but we have never seen the audited statement because whenever we needed to see it, we were told that the books are at home. Whether the books have been audited or not we are not even sure because we have not seen them.

According to the educators and parents, the non-availability of the financial statement during the presentation of the budget created a serious problem because parents did not see how finances were utilised the previous year, hence the difficulty in convincing them to accept the proposed budget for the new financial year.

#### 4.5 Financial ability of the parental SGB members

All functions that SGBs in section 21 schools have to perform, relate in one way or another to the financial skills and experience of the members of the SGB, namely paying for services rendered to the school as well as purchasing text books, educational material or equipment for the school. This implies that SGBs should include members with some financial or accounting background, either in terms of experience or qualifications (Bischoff 1997: 92). Many studies, however, have revealed

that SGBs in disadvantaged communities often do not have the necessary skills to handle their finances sufficiently.<sup>2</sup>

The parent component of the SGB in school A stressed that they were able to manage the large amount of money associated with section 21 status and they have been doing this for the past few years. This is evident because they were able to take their books for auditing. The chairperson of the SGB said:

The majority of us are educated such that we can read policies on our own and can see if things are going well or not and we can check if money is handled well and we can be accountable on such areas. This is made easy by the fact that we work as a team and the principal is transparent and helpful as well.

It was difficult to determine the ability of the parent component in the other schools because in the case of C parents were not given a chance in managing financial affairs. They were only involved where and when the principal deemed it necessary, for instance when they had to move from house to house to collect school fees from parents who were in arrears with their payment. However, one could assume that parents did not have enough skills to handle financial matters, because they were even denied the opportunity to go for departmental training and workshops and their official academic qualifications were low. This does not say that these parents cannot manage the budget, but they need at least the assistance of a well-trained and educated principal to do the actual budget management. They can make decisions about the budget which are part of budget management, but a trained and sufficiently literate person must do the actual inscriptions in budget documents.

School B also had serious problems in managing finances since the treasurer, who was also the finance officer, moved to the regional office in August of the previous year. She had never been replaced. The researchers were never allowed to scrutinise the financial books or statement of schools B and C. This did not help to determine the competencies of the parental SGB members, as access to the financial statements could assist to make more meaningful conclusions about their participation and level of contributions.

2 Cf Heystek 2004, Karlsson 2002, Motala & Pampallis 2001, Van Wyk 2004, CFBT 2004.

#### 4.6 SGB parental involvement in curricular and extra-mural activities

According to section 21(1) (b), a section 21 school is expected to determine the extra-curriculum of the school and choice of subject options in terms of provincial curriculum policy (RSA 1996: 12). In order to do this the school should have a curriculum and extra-curricular committees. The curriculum committee should, among other functions, ensure that the school has the necessary resources for its subject offerings and should be aware of the latest curriculum policies and developments, including provincial policies (Dept of Education 2002: 17). The extra-curricular committee should ensure that there is a proper timetable for extra-curricular activities, that adequate safety measures are in place and that funds are available (Dept of Education 2002: 18). Both committees should comprise parents and educators, as well as learners in the case of secondary schools.

There was no curriculum or extra curricular committee in any of the three sampled schools. The SGBs in the schools were not even consulted when deciding which subjects were to be offered. A typical example was when the School Management Team (SMT) of one of the secondary schools decided to cancel Afrikaans as the third language of choice. Parents were only consulted after the negative effect that this decision had on the grade 12 results of the previous year had been realised.

Parental governors were also excluded from the extra-curricular committees and therefore they were not part of the decision-making about sport participation and activities. Principals and educators responded to this exclusion by saying that it had always been done in that particular way, and they felt no need to involve parents. Moreover, one educator added:

Our parents have never been to school and therefore they are not familiar with these sporting activities because they have never played these games.

However, this was disputed by one of the parents who indicated that they are not always informed about the games, hence their failure to attend and assist at schools. He stressed that he was a soccer player and he was prepared to assist in coaching the soccer squad, provided he was invited.

None of the three schools had tangible measures to improve the involvement of parents in curriculum and extra-curricular activities, as all the respondents agreed that parental involvement in their schools was poor. Furthermore, the schools did not exercise clear measures of safety during sporting activities. However, all three schools used the afternoons, especially on Thursdays, for sports practices.

#### 4.7 Measures to maintain and improve the school buildings

One of the allocated functions of section 21 SGBs is the maintenance and improvement of the school's property, buildings and grounds occupied by the school. As a result of the competing needs that government is faced with, it encourages schools to establish partnerships with other stakeholders as it is incapable of improving the quality of the schools' infrastructure and the general quality of education on its own (Gultig *et al* 1999: 13).

In the sampled schools, only school A was able to procure funds from private donors such as Pfunanani Trust and the National Lottery Board. This governing body has parents with the experience and knowledge to assist them to acquire these funds. They utilised the money for building classrooms and improving the sporting facilities at the school. The other two schools maintained vegetable gardens, providing produce as a means to raise funds. Although the South African Schools Act section 37(3) states that all funds collected by the school should be deposited in the school's account, this was not the case in school B, because the money from this project seemed to have been the prerogative of the Agricultural Science educator who was in charge of the project.

No school amongst the sampled schools was involved in any meaningful or productive fundraising. In school A each child was expected to have raised at least R11 per year in addition to the school fees which amounted to R30 per annum. This money was raised through allowing learners not to wear uniform on certain days (civvies days) and letting them pay R1 for this privilege. As mentioned earlier, this school also sells vegetables to augment the feeding scheme project that the department conducts for learners. The other two schools did not engage in any activity to raise funds, except requesting parents to do so when a need arose. This was rather difficult, because parents were usually very

reluctant to contribute as many of them even had problems in paying the required compulsory school fees.

Schools need to raise money so that they can in fact take advantage of the power to make decisions about their funds. The allocated funds from the government cannot really assist schools to improve and develop their facilities as well as the teaching and learning. The funds from the department of education are just sufficient to do the bare minimum. It merely amounts to maintenance with limited development opportunities.

Although it was winter when the schools were visited, school B had well-kept grounds with grass and flowers. The school has two security guards paid by the SGB and a caretaker who works in the garden tending flowers, planting and cutting grass when necessary. School A also had well-kept school grounds; however, there was no grass or flowers as the school did not have a borehole like the promenading school. The school also had security guards paid by the SGB to guard the school during the night.

School C's buildings were dilapidated, as windows and doors were broken and the general environment of the school left a lot to be desired. The school's electricity had been disconnected and the SGB indicated that they were not aware of this. However they indicated that this posed a serious threat to the security of the school because, although they had hired security guards to take care of the school during the night, this was a waste of time and financial resources as it is not easy to get hold of somebody in the dark. The two secondary schools had a caretaker employed by the department of education to take care of the environment. However, it was difficult to determine exactly what the person was supposed to do, because there was no job description available.

#### 4.8 Training of SGBs for section 21 functions

Maile (2002: 327) argues that the education service can work effectively and develop creatively only if stakeholders grasp their responsibilities and act accordingly. SGB members can only do this if they have received sufficient training, as the competence of SGB members relates to the amount of training that they have received (Van Wyk 2004: 53). This clearly necessitates intensive training if the skills of SGB members are to be enhanced.

Some of the SGB members in the sampled schools had undergone some training, although the majority of them agreed that the training did not focus on section 21 functions and the real problems that schools experience, for instance drafting and adopting policies. They strongly felt that they needed to go for training that would focus on the functions associated with section 21 schools, as this was more challenging. SGB members in school C indicated that they had attended only one workshop since they came into office and this workshop was for induction. The chairperson of the SGB in this school indicated his frustration:

We have never been to any workshop except the first one we attended when we had just been elected. We never receive invitations informing us to go to workshops. We only get to know about these workshops from SGBs of other schools who know us and become surprised at our absence.

Principals stressed the need to train all SGB members (and not just two as is currently the norm), empowering them to carry out section 21 functions meaningfully as new office bearers are elected each year. Furthermore, some of the parent SGB members are not always available to attend workshops because of their work commitments. However, the section 21 co-ordinator did not agree with this:

It is true that SGBs especially the parent members do not have sufficient skills, but the department has ample time to workshop, train and monitor SGBs because there are three years in which to do the training. Many SGB members are able to attend workshops that the department organise because the majority of them are self-employed or unemployed.

This is contradictory to what the principals expressed. The difference in opinion here seems to stem from the fact that when training is arranged, the principals and SGBs hastily arrange for representation by any member available (irrespective of his/her portfolio) to attend the workshop on behalf of the executive member of the SGB. This misleads the department into believing that the workshop is well attended, because only two members are usually required to attend the workshop. In most cases the workshops are arranged at short notice, and there is often no annual programme to indicate planned training. Consequently, employers cannot release SGB members for training, as there are times when this happens during the week. Even if training happens over weekends, many people end up not attending because of the short notices. The section 21 co-ordinator indicated that the Limpopo Department of Education usually

holds two workshops per year, one on governance in April and the other on financial management in September. However, if an individual misses the training, s/he will have to wait until the following year, and these workshops do not usually happen as planned (if they ever happen at all). In Mpumalanga training is also fraught with problems because the School Governance section only becomes active after the elections when they conduct induction for the new governors.

The chairperson of the National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB) felt strongly that SGBs could only be equipped with the required skills if training occurred twice per quarter and not twice per year. He also added that the duration that SGB members hold office is very short, which in itself is a disadvantage, because it does not give them the necessary experience. He cited the lack of education as a great disadvantage and he remarked:

SGBs were going to be effective if retired policemen, lawyers, doctors, nurses and teachers could take the challenge to serve in the SGB but most of them are reluctant because nobody compensates them.

The fact that the department of education does not lend a hand to their organisation exacerbates the situation as they are in a good position to assist, but there is nothing that they can do if they do not have the resources.

## 5. Conclusion and recommendations

The South African Schools Act expects school governing bodies to perform the functions according to section 20 and 21 allocated to them. The expectation is that the SGB as a team must perform all the functions, but nothing prevents or prohibits a governing body from letting the principal do all the work, with the rest of the members just discussing the draft documents or even accepting the documents without discussing it as one of the principals mentioned. Although this might not be in accordance with the expected democratic participation of communities in school activities, the SGB is performing the functions as stipulated. The mere fact that parents are the majority in the SGB with a parent as chairperson does not implicate that the parents must do all the work, while the principal in his/her official capacity as a member of the SGB just receives and accepts their policies.



Active and effective participation, leading to school improvement, will depend largely on the experience and competencies of the parents which is still lacking in the current governing bodies. Enslin & Dieltens (2002: 19) argue that participation on its own does not guarantee that disadvantaged communities are able to effectively change their conditions or recognise the blockages to policy transformation. It is only when these communities are capacitated and have the necessary resources that they may be able to move away from the cycle of making demands without effectively being able to change the policy to their advantage. Motala & Pampallis who state that at the local level, a school community given power by legislation could have that power rendered useless by a lack of the necessary skills. This became evident in the process of the development of SASA where of the approximately 1200 submissions received, the majority came from previously white structures that have immense resources and knowledge for policy intervention (Sayed 2002: 42).

Principals are therefore compelled to be actively involved in, for example, the financial management for the schools to perform their expected educational role. The high level of involvement from principals in the management of the budget may become problematic, since a court judgement indicated that principals must not be directly involved with the financial management of the school (Moseneke 2002: 883, 884). This has specific implications for schools where the parents and the community do not have people with the necessary skills to perform this function. Again, this will require sustained training to ensure that the SGB members remain in their positions for at least the three-year term of election. This might be a reason why the National Minister of Education wanted to reduce the “powers” of the SGB and render more power to principals (Pandor 2005).

One of the areas of the financial management for governing bodies is the maintenance and improvement of school buildings and facilities which are important for improvement. The maintenance may be achieved with limited funds, but improvement of facilities and buildings need sufficient funding. Rural schools with low school fees, even in the non-school fee paying schools, will need more funding and especially the ability to manage the funds to enable them to improve their schools. Paolo Freire (O'Connor 2000: 24) emphasises that the “the maintenance of schools, timely repairs and streamlining the bureaucracies are all

indispensable to the effective functioning of schools". Davidoff & Lazarus (1997:117) support this by emphasising that the school environment is a major factor in determining whether optimal learning and development of its staff and students occur. A school with broken windows and doors, graffiti on the walls and no sufficient toilet facilities poses a health risk to learners, who may consequently develop a negative attitude towards the school. This situation usually results in learners further vandalising the school (Mtshali 1999: 13). Dilapidated school buildings threaten the health, safety and peace of mind of learners and inculcate fear and instability into their lives, hence their need to carry dangerous weapons to school in order to protect themselves from each other and from thugs that may enter the school. It is therefore imperative that the school's buildings be well managed and well maintained.

The allocation of section 21 functions through provincial legislation is not advantageous to the schools in the case study. They do not have the human or financial capacity to perform the section 21 functions. It may be financially and administratively beneficial to the provincial department, because section 21 schools took over responsibilities from the departments. This case study indicates that the section 21 status does not automatically improve education in these schools. School improvement is supposed to be the main aim of effective governance of schools, and it is not the case with the schools in the case study. The limited training and communication from the provincial department of education to schools who have been allocated the section 21 functions, contributed to the schools' lack of ability to perform the said functions.

Granting schools section 21 status is potentially a powerful tool to extend democratic participation in educational decision-making. The acquisition of the functions associated with section 21 status seems to have a positive impact on the functioning of SGBs with strong and capable leaders as well as competent governing body members. It is a motivating factor for these schools to take control of the money allocated to schools, for example school A in the case study.

The culture of performing the section 21 functions in the rural areas is still in its infancy and SGBs in these areas are not coping with the section 21 functions thrust upon them through departmental mandates. Two of the SGBs cannot readily claim that they can manage the large sums of money deposited into their accounts, because they do not have

financial policies, financial committees, skills and competencies, and parents are not involved in extra- and intracurricular activities. In addition, these are the requirements for a school to qualify for section 21 functions. It is therefore not clear why the provincial department granted the section 21 functions to these and other similar schools, because in the case study schools, there is limited evidence that they are able to comply with the requirements or benefit from the section 21 functions.

The supposed training seems to have limited influence on establishing and improving a more democratic society in enhancing the participatory and decision-making skills in schools and their related communities. The limited number of SGB members, especially the parents who receive training, means they do not get enough training or experience in the democratic process. In the case study schools' educators as well as parents were not informed or involved in the allocation of section 21 functions, which is detrimental to the democratic aims of our society. To achieve their aim of democratising our society, the departments of education must take up their responsibility to sustain the training of SGBs and ensure that new members will receive training. Since the participants mentioned that the term of the SGB is too short, the period in office can also change to four years instead of three. This will give the people in the SGB a better chance of using their experience and training to improve schools. Selecting non-parental members from the community, like pensioned police officers and teachers may also enhance the skills and experience which will improve the ability of the SGB to perform the expected section 21 functions. The parental SGB members make a limited contribution to the financial management of the school. The lack of ability or the principal's perception that parents lack abilities to manage the funds, as well as the unwillingness of the principal to involve the parents in the financial management, has detrimental effects on their participation.

The Education Laws Amendment Bill, 2004 initiated the process to discontinue the limited, but important income from school fees in poorer communities. The department demarcate the funds paid to schools to specific post allocation, for example telephone account or office stationery. Hence the SGB has limited "powers" to decide what to do with the funds as part of their section 21 "status". This may be part of a controlled learning curve for governing bodies, but the limited literacy skills and high number of resignations from parents negate the learning potential. The real power for an SGB comes from having sufficient money,

and the schools with sufficient money get it from school fees. If the department wants to limit the parental contribution from school fees, it must make sufficient funds available from the state's budget. Declaring schools as non-school fee paying schools will leave the message to communities that they must not pay any fees. This may have a detrimental effect on these schools. Any extra funds, even small amounts, can assist SGB to improve their schools, especially the section 21 functions. Non-school fee paying schools may receive more money now from the department than what they did from the limited school fees in the past, but governing bodies must have the abilities to manage these funds to improve their schools, otherwise the money may be lost due to limited capacity, especially of the parental members. This research was completed before a number of schools were declared non-school fee paying schools, but further research may indicate if these schools already had section 21 "powers" or if they will receive the section 21 functions since they have more money available. The governing bodies from non-school fee paying schools should receive extra attention and training to ensure successful utilisation of the available funds.

The parents lack involvement in the curricular and extramural activities, because there is limited communication between the parents and the educators. The educators are also used to parents traditionally not being involved in these activities; therefore they did not even attempt to get the parents more involved. This is one field where the parents, even those with limited literacy skills, can make positive contributions. It is not necessary for parents to be able to read to know which sport and cultural activities may be beneficial for their children. The parents can also assist in the decisions about the curriculum, because they have wisdom which will assist them to know what will be the best subjects for their children.

SGBs' skills and competencies in the rural areas need to be enhanced extensively in financial matters, especially in fundraising, in order to avoid the stratification of schools and the production of an unequal system of education which can result in the marginalisation of disadvantaged communities. Unless all governance functions are accessible and equally practised in school, the democratisation of schooling in South Africa will remain policy rhetoric (Karlsson 2002: 335). This therefore calls for a revisit into how schools acquire section 21 status, as it is of no use for the department to continue ploughing in money where it is not correctly utilised and accounted for.

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