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Perspective of the Parent Governor

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ABSTRACT

Elected parent governors constitute the majority on the school governing bodies in South Africa's public schools, yet their involvement lacks effectiveness. Pilot research conducted in peri-urban and semi-rural Western Cape schools in 2014 and 2015 indicates that parent governors understand their responsibilities well enough, but their effectiveness is limited by three factors: a general unwillingness on the part of many of the school principals to fully incorporate parent governors into their legitimate roles; an overwhelming number of ex-principals in Institutional Management and Governance positions who favour interaction with the principal to the exclusion of the governing body; and the dominance of retired principals in the leadership structures of the organized associations of school governing bodies. Opportunities for improving parent effectiveness in governance therefore exist within the school, between the school and the district and provincial administrations, and through the formation of school governor associations that are more truly representative of parent governors.

The study contributes to a larger body of work funded by the European Union Programme to Support Pro-Poor Policy Development for the purpose of making recommendations to remove binding constraints in public education. It examines recently collected data in the light of the criteria for successful governance identified by the Ansell and Gash collaborative governance framework. The Ansell and Gash model derives from a meta-analysis of over a hundred public-private collaborative projects. The success criteria revealed are (1) that starting conditions must be conducive to collaboration; (2) that leadership must be inclusive; (3) that institutional design must be sympathetic; and (4) that trust and mutual confidence must be present, and can best be attained through the use of an agreed-upon collaborative process.

Acknowledgements

I. Introduction: Self-Governance of Schools

The current policy of self-governance, that is, collaborative, multi-stakeholder, site-based governance, can be viewed as part of a trend during the 1990s and 2000s towards global public-private partnerships in schools and other public institutions. The inclusion of parents in the running of public schools would influence and improve teacher and administrator accountability, and would lead to better learner outcomes – the evidence however is inconclusive (Pritchett 2013). In the 1990s, South African policy makers and advisors perceived parent participation in school governance to be desirable since it would allow for a deepening of democratic participation in a country starved of meaningful democratic process under the Apartheid and earlier regimes. The policy papers leading to the formulation of the 1996 South African Schools Act uniformly expressed the view that democratization through participation and representation would provide parents a more effective voice in their children's education, a stronger commitment to the improvement of education for their children, and more accountability from the educators. Parent voice and commitment would ensure educator accountability that in turn would lead to improved learner outcomes. It was also assumed that parents from all socio-economic classes would be willing to volunteer and make sacrifices in order to create the schools they wanted for their children. (The Hunter Report 1995).

A national government review of school governance in the early 2000s acknowledged the riskiness of meaningful self-governance in the lower socio-economic schools since they are in communities plagued by high unemployment and crime rates, teacher shortages and poor teacher attitude, and in some cases, gross misallocations of funds and resources (Department of Education 2004). Given these challenges, it is perhaps not surprising that little attention has been given thus far to measuring the impact on learner outcomes of the self-governance model. Routine data collected by the Department of Education over the last two decades indicates that on the whole learner outcomes have not improved in the low socio-economic status schools (Bruns, Filmer and Patrinos 2011: Chapter 3). These results are discouraging both for the learners and for the experiment in self-governance, especially in light of the evidence that most school governing bodies are properly constituted (Department of Basic Education 2013).

However, proper form does not mean functional and effective. The current research project was designed to explore functionality from the perspective of the parent governors: what is the scope of their voice with respect to decision-making and are they encouraged by the various levels of school administration to be fully engaged and committed? Parents in poorer communities, if employed, make considerable sacrifices of time and money when they participate in their children's school. If not employed, the dynamic is more complicated.

The South African Schools Act requires school governing bodies to operate at two levels of leadership, managerial and visionary, and to do so without infringing upon the traditional leadership of the principal and the school management team. It used to be that a school principal would be responsible for both, but now the visioning or strategic planning, referred to in the Act as the school "mission", must include the participation and direction of the SGB. However, visionary leadership is only a small part of an SGB's overall duty: an SGB has a heavy burden of financial and fiduciary responsibility, unless stripped of the responsibility by the district and/or province. This research project begins to cast some light on the nature of the challenges involved in sharing school leadership and management. The impact of decision-making and leadership styles within the school and between the school and the district is examined. Finding a mechanism to assess the impact of self-governance on learner outcomes remains elusive and is beyond the scope of this study. Briefly, it is generally known that learner outcomes are contingent upon many factors. Some of the relevant factors with respect to effective school self-governance would have to include a dramatic shift in school leadership style away from command-and-control towards collaborative and facilitative and unambiguous support from all levels of government.

II. The legislative framework and its incentives and disincentives for parent governors

The nation's legislative framework for school organisation, governance, and funding is laid out in the South African Schools Act of 1996 (SASA). SASA collapsed the old race-based administrative structures and brought parents, for the first time, into positions of responsibility with regard to oversight and funding. It instituted school governing boards (SGBs), on which

parent governors would hold the majority voting position regarding the annual school budget, school funding, the structure of the school day, extramural activities, language and discipline policies, facilities and resource management, and post recommendations, albeit within the limits set by national norms and standards and provincial statutes. It stipulated that democratic participation by parents would be "in partnership with the State". (The South African Schools Act, 1996: Preamble).

SASA does not mandate the form or structure of decision making to be used by SGBs, only that each newly elected body submit a reviewed and ratified constitution to their district/provincial administration within 90 days of taking office. Thus it is the prerogative of each newly constituted SGB to determine whether decisions are made by majority vote or consensus or a combination thereof. One of the biggest decisions is the election of the chairperson. A parent from the pool of elected parents must fill this office. Parent governors must outnumber all other governors from teaching and administrative staff, including the principal (and in the case of high schools, one or more learner representatives). Given a typical board size of eleven at a primary school, and twelve or thirteen at a high school, one would expect to find six parent governors on a primary school board and seven on a high school board, and one of them will fill the role of chairperson.

The SGB's financial responsibility and accountability includes the administering of the school fund, the ratification of the annual budget, a process that requires the approval of the whole parent body, fundraising, and accountability through professional annual audits. However, right from the start, provincial departments were given a counterbalancing legal authority to withdraw these rights and obligations (SASA Section 22) and this has happened on a widespread basis with respect to the lower socio-economic status schools across the country: an SGB is categorized by its district and province according to level of perceived capability and competence, and granted budgetary control accordingly.

Similarly with regard to filling all staff posts at the school, including the all-important post of principal, the SGB can only make shortlists and recommendations to district and provincial departments once they have interviewed the candidates. The more important the position, the

more likely it is that the interview process will be guided by the circuit manager assigned to the school and other staff within the district IMGD. A district circuit manager is supposed to be the primary point of contact between his or her assigned schools and the bureaucracy, and as such, is supposed to visit each school on a regular basis to convey departmental requirements, listen to concerns, and link the school with needed resources. It was observed that the circuit manager tended to work exclusively with and through the principal in communicating with the SGB – leading to the perception by parent governors that the principal is the administration's representative at all SGB meetings. Theoretically, district IMDG staff can be called upon to assist with budget development, special projects, and the training of SGB members in the procedures and requirements of the department. There is currently no incentive provided in the system to retain acquired knowledge by encouraging parents to run for a second or third term, or join as a member of staff one of the existing SGBAs. More will be said about this in the section on recommendations since the loss of individual governors with freshly gained SBG experience is a loss to the system of school governance as a whole.

Thus stripped of core financial and leadership tasks, it is not surprising to find that parent governors can become overly involved in new staff postings and learner discipline. With regard to discipline, the SGB is required only to develop a code of conduct after consultation with educators, learners and parents. SGB members are not required to serve on any resulting disciplinary committee (SASA Section 8). It might not be easy for lower socio-economic status parent governors to make the distinction between policy making and implementation, and it would be tempting for many a principal to want to shift, or at least share, the responsibility for action against an individual learner by involving parents in disciplinary hearings.

Development of the school mission is a required SGB duty, but the closely-related issue of language of instruction, is one that SASA Section 6 states an SGB "may" get involved in within the limits of national norms and standards. Contrast this "may" with the mandated "must" in the case of school mission statement development, financial matters, fundraising, and code of conduct. Other "musts" (listed in Section 20) include adopting a constitution.

The Province keeps a list of schools that cannot charge school fees, although they can request voluntary contributions, and most do so. Despite contributions forming a miniscule part of the overall budget, they are essential for extramural activities and added building security measures. Collected contributions were reported by chairpersons in the case study as augmenting resources by about one percent, a figure that tallies with the findings of Fiske and Ladd (2004: 144). This is hardly sufficient to hire an extra member of staff, let alone upgrade a basic security system, a playground or sports field – expenses that would not be provided for in the state budget, although special provincial funds might be available. The author found several instances where the parent governors had well-developed fund-raising plans that were stalled by their principal. One mechanism used by principals to stall or halt a plan is to take advantage of the provincial requirement that all NGO participation with the school must be channelled through the principal.

For the most part, both the literature and this pilot project provide scant evidence of meaningful participation by the majority of parent governors, except perhaps by a chairperson (always a parent) willing to work closely with the principal. For the most part, the evidence points to a pattern of abdication on the part of the parent governors - abdication of decision making to the principal and school management team because of a lack of full knowledge about their rights and responsibilities, and because parent governors may understandably rile against being co-opted by the principal and the school management team (SMT) for the difficult work of learner discipline – an obfuscation of the responsibilities.

Among the lower socio-economic status school communities, parent governor associations have been slow to materialize and difficult to maintain. Much of this can be explained by the entirely volunteer nature of parent involvement. It ought to be noted that parent governors are the only elected representatives in the nation who serve without salary or compensation (even travel expense reimbursement is limited and hard to obtain). The lack of organisation on the part of parents is unfortunate, given that the bureaucracy has salaried Institutional Management and Governance Department employees (IMGDs), most of whom are ex-principals with strong networks and entrenched careers. This discrepancy creates a fundamental imbalance of power in their working relationship. Large, formal associations (SGBAs) such as the Federation of

Association of Governing Bodies (FEDSAS), the Governing Body Foundation (GBF), the National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB), and United front for School Governing Bodies (UF4SGBs) may provide the surface appearance of representing parent governors, but on closer inspection, one finds that most, if not all, of the leadership positions are filled with ex-principals. After twenty years of school governance, one might reasonably expect to find seasoned parent governors in regional and leadership roles, and their absence leads one naturally to question whose interests are being represented by the SGBAs: the parents or the principals?

The school governance system as currently structured relies on the willingness of parents to act in the best interests of all learners, and their willingness to learn the bureaucratic procedures they must follow as governors. To this end, IMGDs at all three levels of government spend a good deal of time on building and delivering training for parent governors. Some training is delivered in-house; some is put out to tender. To date, there is no evidence of parent governor or ex-governor involvement in either the design or the delivery of these training programmes. The SGBAs that have tendered are some of those organised and run by ex-principals, namely FEDSAS and GBF. The author attended several such programmes during 2014 and 2015, and was struck by the one-way flow of information and instruction from district to parents. Apparently, the provincial IMGD holds monthly SGB input sessions, but the author has not yet met a parent governor who has attended such a meeting (WCED IMGD meeting March 5, 2015).

One might argue that it is reasonable that parents would be motivated to serve because they have the interests of their children at heart; however, the motivation for school involvement becomes more complex for parents who struggle to make ends meet and may be chronically underemployed. It is understandable that they would seek employment opportunities, as well as advancement possibilities. The literature tends to view this as rent seeking, rather than more positively as community building. There is some evidence that districts and schools are sensitive to this, providing a few casual employment opportunities for parents in the areas of facilities security, building maintenance, the school feeding scheme and even teacher substitution when a teacher is absent for short periods of time.

SGBs are re-constituted every three years through the election of parent governors by the parent body, of teachers by the teachers and non-teaching staff by their constituency – and, in high schools, learners by the student body. There are no term limits for parents provided they have a child registered at the school (SASA 1996).   However, it should came as a surprise, given the context described above, that few parents choose to serve more than one term. The exception is usually the chairperson where he or she has found a comfortable working relationship with the principal. While each province sets its own process and criteria for voter participation, the bar is remarkably low: in the Western Cape it is only fifteen percent of the parents registered on the voters roll, which is kept open until the beginning of the election "meeting". Failing a "quorum", namely fifteen percent, a second meeting is held and those present, however many or few, will be deemed to form a quorum. Voting is then supposed to happen. (WC Provincial Gazette 7352 Feb 6 2015).

III. School Governance: literature review and a search for measures of success in self governance

Governance is defined in the academic literature as the involvement of private citizens in public policy at local and regional levels, and it entails some combination of policymaking, implementation, and oversight in a formalized collective setting. Commonly, the initiative comes from a government agency with a mandate to decentralize or devolve a function. Government would therefore tend to set the rules for engagement, although these can be challenged. There is an expectation, in the name of democratic participation, that the private sector is willing to engage on a volunteer or self-funded basis (Ansell and Gash: 544-548). This description fits the intention behind the self governance, or local site-based collaborative governance, of schools in South Africa.

One of the dangers of public-private partnership is the blurring of ultimate responsibility, creating uncertainty about measures of accountability and possibly leading to blame and scapegoating of one stakeholder group by another (Stoker 1998). However, inherent in the

concept of public-private partnership are the notions of open access to information for all stakeholders, deliberative discussions, consensus building, and decision making with an orientation towards consensus. In other words, citizen participants are not merely consulted by, or informed by, public agents: thorny issues are negotiated, and disagreements are accommodated.

Political science professors, Ansell and Gash, did a meta-analysis of 137 collaborative arrangements in their search for the criteria that make for successful and effective public-private governance partnerships. Four broad factors emerged as critical for successful and effective collaboration: favourable starting conditions, sympathetic institutional design, inclusive leadership style, and an internal collaborative process that engenders trust and confidence. In such an internal process, stakeholders meet face-to-face, build shared understanding, deal constructively with the issues of trust, and focus initially on small but mutual gains. The whole governance process must be driven by a leadership structure that is mutually acceptable to all parties, and flexible and inclusive enough to allow for a democratic process to operate and power plays to be contained (Ansell and Gash 2007).

The South African studies conducted from around 2000 to the present (and most of them are represented here) can be summarized with respect to their observations and insights about school governance, and placed within the Ansell and Gash framework as follows:

(A) Starting Conditions: are they conducive to collaboration?

- SGBs work differently under conditions of poverty where a lack of education and experience on the part of the parents means that impetus for parent involvement should come from principal – ten school case studies, paired, over 4 provinces by Taylor, Gamble, Spies and Garish, in Taylor, Mabogoane and van der Berg (2013). In other words, authoritative direction may be more important than democratic collaboration in the effective running of a school

- Female governors are less vocal and less involved; the absence of females in role of chairperson has been noted, especially by Mncube in his early KZN studies (2009); he attributes this to the gendered nature of traditional society

- The one-size-fits-all approach to governor training by the district is inefficient and inappropriate (Xaba 2011)

- Traditional African culture is a barrier to the participation of non-educator governors. Training for *all* participants must *go "beyond the technicalities of SGBs to critically examine culture, identities, roles and power relationships"*. This research involved two focus groups of educators and learners in WC and KZN (Harber and Mncube 2011, with quote taken from p.20)

The evidence points to several serious cultural and bureaucratic obstacles to the formation of conditions conducive to power sharing and collaboration.

(B) Institutional design: is it sympathetic to private-public partnership?

- Provincial administrations may not be clear with SGBs about their role and authority – Heystek (2004)

- The three year term of office is too short given the specialized and technical nature of the core governance functions of financial management and resource management (Xaba 2011)

- Authority heavily skewed towards principal and teachers - 27 schools surveyed by Karlsson (2002)

- School Management Team and Principal usurp the decision making duties of the SGB – Mncube (2009)

- Broader research seems to indicate that the longer the governance implementation period, the better the student achievement effect – Bruns, Filmer and Patrinos (2011) in an analysis of 29 international programmes

- Public-private partnership cannot emerge if black parents are under-capacitated; parent training and travel reimbursement is recommended - Port Elizabeth, 10 SGBs, 40 interviews by Mbokodi and Singh (2011)

- The "virtues" of democracy must be learned through practicing democracy, and many principals are in need of coaching, training and practice – November et al. (2010: 786)

The above observations and conclusions indicate that the institutional design is not, as yet, sufficient to safeguard the decision making powers vested in the school governing body as a whole. The reader may notice an absence of election process studies. This project has made a point of including the election process since it is a key element of institutional design. It is unfortunate that school district interaction with SGB parents appears limited to "building capacity", and doing so through workshop training alone.

(C) Leadership Style: is it inclusive?

- Principals do not like shifting power relationships; see parental involvement as interference; huge role uncertainty – comprehensive Gauteng school survey by Heystek (2006)

- Grandstanding by principals – the same Heystek study

- Principals will remain "locked into a paradigm of power" that sanctions their authoritative, anti-democratic behavior unless the authorities stop assuming they know how to behave democratically and start insisting on a change of behavior – November et al. (2010: 787)

- SGB parent governors feel forced to endorse disciplinary actions by the School Management Team and principal that they fundamentally disagree with – Mncube 2006 research in KwaZulu Natal (2009: 92)

There is an unfortunate weight of evidence against the facilitative, cooperative, negotiated form of decision-making that was envisioned by the South African Schools Act of 1996. In fact, there appears to be little scope for parent governors to act according to the law. The leadership style of principals and school management teams remains an area of concern.

(D) The collaborative process itself: does it build mutual trust and confidence?

- Power plays by School Management Team in which the educators denigrate and ignore parent governors with less education and qualifications – Mncube (2009)

- Tensions between educators and SGB parent governors over educator discipline – van Wyk (2010)

- Tensions between SGB educator governors and parent governors, by Xaba (2004)

- Teacher governors on the defensive – Xaba (2004)

- Trust issues paramount – a second Gauteng survey by Heystek (2006)

Again, there appears to be little evidence of a collaborative process at work during the first thirteen years of the twenty first century (as mentioned above, these summarized studies were published between 2002 and 2013 which means that their data could have been collected as early as 2000).

The Taylor, Gamble, Spies and Garish study of ten lower socio-economic status schools is the first-mentioned under Starting Conditions. This project looked at many aspects of schooling connected with successful learner outcomes, including the institutional incorporation of

parents, and they concluded that the impetus for parent involvement should still come from the principal (Taylor, Mabogoane and van der Berg 2013). However, the studies cited above have revealed that principals, for the most part, view parental involvement as interference in the running of the school and they are resistant to the mandated shift in power relationships. How then does the school-parent governance project even begin to take root?

The Education Department's survey of over five hundred schools in 2011 indicated the principal remained the central decision maker on governance issues (DBE School Monitoring Report 2013). For the bureaucrats, governance control resting in the hands of the principal may be good news, but as such the well-intentioned and volunteer efforts made by parent governors is undermined. The tight collusion between principals and bureaucrats seems to squeeze out any chance for meaningful parent negotiation and shared decision-making. It ought to be noted that if a principal dominates or skirts around the SGB decision making process, then parent governors may feel they are wasting their time and effort..

In a thoughtful analysis by Lewis and Naidoo (2004) that is based on Naidoo's 2002 fieldwork in three Gauteng township schools and three other poorer schools in unspecified locations, SGBs were found to be "not sophisticated enough" to challenge and negotiate with the public education bureaucracy or the school management team. Their analytical frame consisted of juxtaposing a "theory of action" (what is espoused) with a "theory in use" (what is enacted). They find an "alarming narrowing" of governance from the espoused constitutional vision of democracy as representativeness and participatory involvement to an enactment heavily weighted towards a narrow form of representation and an even narrower redefinition of participatory involvement, limited to competency and compliance issues such as "learning one's role, mastering technical skills…following official procedures" (Lewis and Naidoo: 108). What we see, then, is that the form of governance represented by the school administration to parent and staff communities has been restrictive, leading to constrained enactment. For the most part, these lower socio-economic status schools are simply not asked to, or expected to, address and formulate policy.

Lewis and Naidoo have expressed concern that SGBs "serve as a mechanism to contain parental discontent and ensure that additional resources are available to the school". (2004: 106). They conclude:

> "Any re-definition of roles has to confront established power structures and conventions and their obsession with managerial and organizational efficiency, as these are often antithetical to genuine broad-based participation of local communities" (2004: 108).

They have raised a serious and legitimate concern that crosses provincial boundaries and perhaps ought to be addressed at the national level.

The Research Project and the Case Study Approach

Do today's parent governors of no-fee schools, in 2015, still have to contend with anti-democratic principals and power plays from the school management teams? Do they have the resources they need, and if not, are they at least resourceful? How do they feel about the opportunity to serve their school community, and what do they regard as signs of success or distress, frustration and failure? The author's six case studies attempt to address these questions. The ethnographic case study research design was adopted because it lends itself to uncovering issues and concerns seen as relevant and pressing by the parent governors themselves. An ethnographic researcher is trained to set aside their bias, experience reality through the eyes and words and behaviour of another, and comprehend and appreciate the shape and context of their lives, their sense of duty, and so forth. There was an initial year of informal interviewing and observation during 2014 that brought the author in contact with numerous IMGD officers and district circuit managers, as well as several SGB Association office-bearers, before the formal research project began in early 2015, and this was immensely helpful in providing the overall context.

For the sake of readability, this section of the report is written in the first person – that is, I refer to myself as "I" rather than the more formally structured "author". After obtaining the necessary approvals from the provincial research directorate in late 2014, I sought permission to interview parent governors from the principals on the approved list of schools during the

SGB election period in early 2015. The provincial research directorate stipulated that I must first seek the permission of the principals. Six out of nine principals approached provided that permission. My initial visit to each school was welcoming and friendly, even where permission was denied. Principals and front office staff throughout must be given high marks for good public relations. In most cases, I was able to arrive early and observe playground activities, and the extent to which the supervising adults might be parents. I would chat informally with several teachers before finding my way to the principal's office. Of the principal, I asked broad questions about the socio-economic conditions of the learners, their utilization of the school feeding program, and their need for social and psychological services. I made it clear that I wished to interview only parent governors – I needed neither classroom visits nor teacher interviews. The exclusion of teacher governors may be a shortcoming of the research project, but it did facilitate access to the parent governors.

Parent interviews were arranged in places and at times that were convenient for the parents, such as a road stop restaurant at the end of a working day, or shopping mall café on a Saturday afternoon. Meetings were relaxed and leisurely. No recording was done until a certain level of trust had been established and confidentiality agreed to. All recordings are on file with RESEP, as are the notes made after the interviews and the two-page summary reports on each school. I found that my initial semi-structured questionnaires soon gave way to a few open-ended questions along the lines of the questions posed at the beginning of this section. Sometimes a question would be posed directly to the interviewee, but mostly, I would be looking for an interviewee's personal and professional concerns without guiding the interviewee directly. However, once I realized the seriousness of one particular issue, I did ask every parent interviewee if they were aware that their SGB has a formal constitution and that they have an obligation to review and ratify it within ninety days of taking office.

All in all, I conducted twenty interviews across six primary schools in the Western Cape school districts of Overberg and Winelands: fourteen with parent governors and six with principals. In addition, six SGB election meetings and two SGB handing-over meetings were attended. I conducted this fieldwork during the months of February, March and April 2015, a period specifically chosen in order to catch outgoing as well as on-going parent governors. I also

sought to ascertain the form of decision making on the SGB and the leadership style(s) of the Principal and the School Management Team. The question was usually phrased in terms of how SGB meetings were conducted and how decisions were made.

When invited to observe nomination and election meetings, and the subsequent handing-over meetings, I did not participate in any way other than to chat informally with those around me. In other words, I retained a role as ethnographer. At the nomination and election meetings, I observed the attendance of parents and the behaviour of the electoral officers towards the voters, the candidates and the process. Taken in conjunction with everything else learned about the leadership and governance of the school, I could judge what the parent turnout – sufficient for a quorum or not – might be saying about parent confidence in the governance of the school, and I could also assess the value placed by the school leadership on parent participation.

In summary, interviews with principals and parents covered the following ground:
- Key socio-economic conditions in which the schools must operate

- What parent governors are doing as governors, and how they are feeling are about their successes and challenges? What influences their decision to run, or not run, for re-election?

- How governance decisions are made at the school, and to what extent are parent governors involved? In other words, how democratic is the ongoing functioning of the SGB?   How democratic is the election process, and how might elections influence board functioning and vice versa?

- Are parent governors clear about their constitutional rights, roles and responsibilities?

- What institutional and organizational avenues exist for parent governors to strengthen their role in governance?

Key Socio-Economic Conditions for the Case Study Schools

From the initial interviews conducted with principals, the following picture emerged about the context in which the schools operate: the schools' communities were all characterized by a core of families who had lived in the catchment area for several generations, supplemented by a large number of recent arrivals. Three of the schools had over 10% of their students living with guardians and a further 5-10% of families who regularly migrated back and forth to either the Eastern Cape or the Free State. I was told repeatedly that while these families regarded the other provinces as home, they were in the Western Cape because believed they had found a better source of employment, social services, and schooling.

Every principal and chairperson spoke of security issues at the school, indicative of high levels of unemployment in their communities. They were also concerned with the meagre social services and counselling provided by their district given the high levels of domestic abuse and crime.

The languages of learning and teaching (LOLTs) in the six schools varied, probably more so than would be the case in other provinces. Two schools were Xhosa in the Foundation Phase, with subsequent grades taught in English alone at the first school, and both English and Sotho at the second school. Schools three and four were Afrikaans across all grades. Schools 5 and 6 had parallel streams: the streams in the fifth school were Afrikaans and English while the streams in the sixth school were the same except that they also added Xhosa to the Foundation phase of the English stream.

Themes Emerging from the Research Study

Content analysis of the interview data reveals five themes and they are elaborated and illustrated below.

Theme 1 - A growing talent base in school governance

While past research has revealed some evidence of rent seeking and other opportunistic behaviour on the part of parents holding office (not limited to the Western Cape), this research points to a growing number of very competent parents – both men and women – who have been willing to use their initiative and apply skills learned in their professions in accounting, banking, nursing, logistics, research, social services, trucking, and the trades. Boxes A and B highlight the feelings of success and accomplishment evident in two of the schools:

SCHOOL A: The chairperson is a strong leader who has initiated employment opportunities for parents in feeding programme, and organized street vendors to provide better quality food on the school grounds during school hours.   The chairperson has worked hard and earned the trust and confidence of the other SGB governors and some of the teachers. She makes a point of visiting classrooms and introducing visitors to teachers and learners. The principal set this example three years ago when he went class to class with the parent governors to introduce them to the teachers and learners. The chairperson brings issues to the principal and is tenacious. She did not want to serve another term (she said she was very tired) but the parents wouldn't hear of it and have re-elected her. Her profession is nursing and she holds a full-time job. She says she needs the teachers to be on board more than they currently are.

SCHOOL B: Parent governors call the meetings: they conduct parent meetings without any school staff being present, and they decide when the SGB must meet. This practice emerged several years ago over a non-curriculum non-teacher issue. Parents met, discussed alternatives at length, and then approached the principal with a solution. Since then, non-classroom and non-curriculum issues are handled this way. The chairperson arranges with the principal to call a meeting of the SGB so that issues previously debated in a parent forum can be debated with SGB members and a mutual agreement reached.   The chair is a security officer on a wine estate; the other governor interviewed is leaving to run an NGO. The Chairperson is confident that he will be elected by his SGB to serve another term as chair. He thinks it would be a good idea to belong to a parent governor association and wonders whether he might start such an organisation.

Theme 2 - A flawed Nomination And Election Process

All schools under study followed the same process, sending out nomination forms as early as January or February (but without instructions on how to complete) and then sending a calendar notice home with learners about the date and time of the nomination and election meeting. All schools held their first and second meetings on a weekday evening, starting at 7 pm. Some schools kept nomination forms in their reception area. All had a box for nominations. All used, in reduced format, a form provided by the HOD that was written in a formal legalistic style unfamiliar to most South Africans. It is unclear why election officers would choose to use this pro-forma exemplar rather than design a user-friendly version. At every school, the form was printed in only one language, even though most of the schools operated on a daily basis in two or even three languages, and embedded in a general newsletter. It is supposed to be the task of the appointed election officer to make sure parents receive and understand the form, and how to complete it. However, in many cases, officers were appointed only after the forms were disseminated.

The election officer was a principal from a neighbouring school who had attended a specific HOD training course and been appointed by the HOD. The election officer was permitted to appoint an assistant, but the assistant must not be a parent. Assistants turned out to be either the school principal or the deputy principal. The guidelines for parents to lodge a complaint against a decision of their election officer are made available to the election officer but not the parents. In no case were these guidelines ever communicated by the election officers to the parents (although one assisting principal did allude to the possibility).

> **SCHOOL F:** At the first nomination and election meeting, nominees were identified by the election officer and allowed to say a few words. Their names were written up on a large board at the front of the hall, but they remained in the audience and spoke from their seats. This was the most inclusive process observed. Unfortunately, the parent governors at this school are up against teacher governors who seem determined to make life difficult for the principal, even if that disrupts board meetings considerably.

Theoretically, nomination forms were to be opened and recorded by the election officer at the first meeting. Additional nominations could be received at this meeting. In practice, the schools seemed to know who had been nominated, and at only one school were additional nominations collected on the evening. This was a lively process with several specific candidates being nominated over and over again. Most schools had just the requisite minimum of 5 candidates, and so extending the process to include a second meeting would theoretically have allowed for more names to be put forward.

These meetings were indeed a meeting, not elections, since in no case was there a quorum of parents to allow voting to proceed. Two schools almost had quorums and parents attempted to reach out by phone and car to others, but they were not given sufficient time by the election officer to bring the others in. Not surprisingly, in all but one school, the prevailing sentiment among parents was that the required second round, where a size of the quorum did not matter, would be a waste of time to attend. The Province has made no provision for absentee voting or voting by proxy. All in all, the nominations and election process was observed to be an unfriendly and uninspiring process for parents.

SCHOOL E: The turnout of parents at the nomination and election meeting was high - only a few individuals short of the quorum required for voting; but, as parents stood up to go out and fetch the additional voters, the election officer closed the meeting. At this meeting, the election officer had allowed several training programmes to be presented, but no opportunity was provided for nominees to either be identified or to introduce themselves and their ideas. This lost opportunity for parent nominees to be given any limelight was common across all the schools but one.

SCHOOL D: Parent governors reported that staff and teachers were demotivated, and that they were as a result of this. The principal seemed tired and uninterested in their ideas for rejuvenation of the school. Parent governors expressed frustration that their fundraising ideas were falling on deaf ears. They did not know where to turn to. They were not interested in standing for re-election.

Theme 3 - A lack of parent governor awareness of the SGB Constitution and thus their lack of awareness about their role in establishing the SGB decision-making process

Despite the legal requirement that they ratify and submit their constitution to the HOD within 90 days of taking office, several seasoned parent governors and the majority of all interviewed were simply not aware that their SGB even had a formal constitution. SASA Section 18(3) states "The governing body must submit a copy of its constitution to the Head of Department within 90 days of its election". They were surprised to learn that they could and should establish rules of order, rules of conduct, procedures for decision-making and even a process for dealing with deadlocks or conflict. According to a WCED Notice, "A governing body must determine its own rules relating to its meetings and the procedures at such meetings" (Provincial Gazette of Feb 6, 2015, Western Cape Government, 2015: Section 23 (5)]. Even seasoned parent governors were assuming that the principal ruled, and if that became untenable, then they might be able to approach the District IMGD or the Circuit Manager for an intervention.

A sense of rubberstamping decisions already made: These are the words of one of the parent governors, but the sentiment was prevalent in two-thirds of the schools:
"I will not serve another term as governor because the meetings were a waste of time. We parents were used for rubberstamping. The decisions had already been made. Also, the principal sometimes hid behind us to explain his disciplinary actions. I am not comfortable with this".

Theme 4 - An absence of higher levels of parent organization

While several SGB Associations exist in South Africa, they have not made inroads into these schools, with the exception of School C. The principal at School E had been approached on several occasions by one large association, but aware of the dissonance between the non-diverse association and his very diverse and multi-lingual school, he was appropriately wary about introducing them. A quick survey of active school associations in the Western Cape has revealed that they are all staffed with ex-principals and run by ex-principals.

> **SCHOOL C:** Two young and talented parent governors with professional careers (in logistics and finance) voice frustration at the de facto executive committee comprised of the principal and the chairperson, and have decided not to serve again. Instead they have encouraged two outspoken parents to stand, who like them have a vision for a better sports programme – a vision that is floundering because the school seems to lurch from one security-related crisis to another. The principal micro-manages and runs a tight ship. He has organised for the SGB to belong to FEDSAS, an SGB Association that they perceive is run and staffed by ex-principals.

Theme 5 - The predominance of principals in institutional governance and management at district and provincial levels

There appears to be an overwhelming presence of ex-principals in the governance structures, and it is probably explained by the closing of the teaching colleges that used to absorb senior principals. Deployment to management and governance oversight may have seemed the obvious bureaucratic solution at the time, but it has come with consequences, possibly unintended, possibly not. Either way, one is hard pressed to see how parent and community interests will be promoted, let alone supported, by professionals whose careers have been spent within the bureaucratic system.

> The Department of Basic Education prides itself on filling every IMDG position with an ex-principal because it is believed that only a principal has the authority to talk to another principal, and that authority is required when dealing with parents, including parent governors. (Author Interview Sep 3rd, 2014)

All of the above themes merit further research across a larger sampling of schools across provincial administrations.

Policy Recommendations, with a focus on Retention of Talented Parent Governors

The retention of talented and enterprising parent governors is critical to the development and strengthening of site-based school governance, and as such is the focus of the author's policy recommendations. With talented parent retention as a strong focus at all levels of the administration, some of the knotty institutional and leadership issues will naturally resolve themselves. Opportunities for strengthening parent involvement exist in several arenas: at the school and on the SGB; between the SGB and the IMGDs at District and Provincial levels; and within the formal associations of school governing bodies (SGBs).

Recommendations are addressed (A) to the IMDGs since, for the most part, they simply call for an interpretation and application of the existing legislation that is more sympathetic and supportive of parent governors, and (B) to directly to School Principals. All recommendations align with, and promote, the Ansell and Gash criteria for successful governance: starting conditions that are *conducive* to collaboration; *inclusive* leadership; *sympathetic* institutional design; and, the use of an agreed-upon *collaborative* process that builds trust and mutual confidence.

(A) Where the Institutional Management and Governance Departments (IMGDs) at District and Provincial levels can take the initiative:

i. Parent Governors need familiarity with *the SGB Constitution* and their right to amend it. The IMDG should be present at the initial meeting of the new SGB and/or at the handover meeting, to ensure that parent governors receive a copy of the constitution of the outgoing SGB, be given time to read it, and time to discuss why and how they might want to amend it. Parent governors must be informed that their SGB gets to decide, within the first 90 days, how decisions are reached and disagreements are to be handled; and, that these procedures are embedded in their very own constitution.

ii. Parent Governors need to know that their SGB gets to decide, at any time during their three years of office, the extent to which their work could be made more efficient and

effective the formation of (a) an executive committee and/or (b) subcommittees; also the appointment of community members with needed skills, and that these co-opted or appointed members may serve as treasurer and secretary.

iii. Raise parent governor expectations: few parent governors have had the opportunity to see what a truly good school looks like. Provide the funds for SGBs to visit with one another: tours and exchanges, mentorship programs and so forth.

iv. Include Parent Governors as Electoral Officers: officers ought not to be restricted to principals only: parent governors need more recognition and status, so consider appointing those who have served at least one term.   As with principals, they would officiate at a school other than their own.

v. Improve Nominee Visibility at Nomination and Election Meetings: the nominees ought to be given a chance to introduce themselves and describe their vision for the school.

vi. Recognition for Service: Provide certificates for completion of training course, and official letters of appreciation for service rendered to the school.   Where possible, the school leadership team or the district IMGD, ought to consider providing tangible gifts of appreciation.   These governors serve on an entirely volunteer basis, unlike their counterparts in the Administration who are salaried.

vii. School Principals may need further coaching in collaborative process that builds trust and mutual confidence. It may not be good enough to send principals to workshops. Real time one-on-one coaching by qualified circuit managers and IMGD staff may be much more effective.

viii. **And with regard to the developing parent governor interest in joining (or forming) associations of SGBs:** encourage and support the concept of SGBAs as a forum of exchange of information about best practices, as a repository of information, and a way

for seasoned parent governors to contribute further – a kind of career advancement. Make funds available for parent governors, especially chairpersons, to attend existing SGBA meetings and conventions. Institutionalise the next level of training for experienced governors: rather than lose their recently-acquired skills and knowledge about the school to the community at large, make available further training in associational activities, so that the existing SGBAs can begin to be staffed by people other than ex-principals.

(A) Where the School Principal can take the initiative within his or her School Community:

i. Raise parent morale through further opportunities for parent employment: in the lower socio-economic status schools, parent interest increases when they know that opportunities exist for some, even just a few, to work at the school for pay: teacher substitution, the school feeding programme, night security, and maintenance projects are all morale-boosters as well as sources of income.

ii. Capacity building for any member of the parent community: expand capacity building opportunities for parents as a whole to include constructive ways in which parents can become involved at grade level e.g. as classroom/grade parent representatives, as supervisors on learner excursions, and so forth.

iii. Promote parent governor involvement in raising funds for the school: qualified NGOs could offer coaching and assistance to the SGB parents in fundraising and grant writing. To the extent SGBs must fund raise, parent governors ought to be viewed as entrepreneurs, and appreciated and encouraged as such.

iv. Professional working relationship: Parent governors form a separate stakeholder group from the teachers, staff and SLT. As such, the principal should maintain a professional working relationship with them as with the other groups. Co-option of parent

governors in the name of co-operation is not healthy and keeps parents away. Parents need to feel they truly have their own representatives to whom they can take their concerns and their ideas for improvement.

v. Disciplinary hearings: Not all parent governors need to be on the disciplinary subcommittee. This is a sensitive area where some governors feel that are "set up" to deliver bad news.

vi. Visibility for Parent Governors: The exceptional SGB chairperson will take matters into his or her own hands to ensure that teachers and learners get to know the parent governors are. The principal should not miss an opportunity to include and profile the parent governors – on stage and on the agenda at parent meetings and school-wide events, visits to classrooms, visits with NGOs, and so forth.

vii. **And with regard to the developing parent governor interest in joining (or forming) associations of SGBs:** as in the IMGD recommendation above, encourage and support the concept of SGBAs as a forum of exchange of information about best practices, as a repository of information, and a way for seasoned parent governors to contribute further – a kind of career advancement.

Conclusion

Inherent in self governance are notions of open access to information for all stakeholders, deliberative discussions, negotiation of thorny issues, and decision making with an orientation towards consensus. A parent newly elected as school governor faces a daunting task, since the law requires SGBs to manifest two kinds of leadership, managerial and visionary, but without infringing on the leadership of the principal and the school management team. A parent governor in a lower socio-economic school finds much of the legislated financial and fiduciary responsibility scaled back by the province that has been granted the powers to do so.

This pilot project confirms the research literature in finding a pattern of abdication on the part of the parent governors - abdication of decision making to the principal and school management team – because of an obfuscation of roles on the part of the school principal and because parent governors, elected to represent other parents, may understandably rile against being co-opted by the principal. While the parent chairperson might be found working closely with the principal, there is little evidence of meaningful participation by the majority of parent governors.

Yet the current study also finds talented and skilled parents who would like to serve more effectively and are willing to serve multiple terms. Theoretically, opportunities for strengthening parent involvement exist in several arenas: at the school and on the SGB; between the SGB and the IMGDs at District and Provincial levels; and within the formal associations of school governing bodies, the SGBAs. The retention of talented and enterprising parent governors is critical to the development and strengthening of site-based school governance, and as such, is the focus of the author's policy recommendations.

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