

## Educators' perceptions of the efficiency of school governing bodies

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The efficiency of school governing bodies, as perceived by educators, was investigated. The School Governing Body Efficiency Scale (SGBES) was used to determine the extent to which educators perceive the efficiency of their respective governing bodies. The findings indicated that educators differed significantly in their perceptions of the efficiency of school governing bodies. The results also showed that educator biographical variables (gender, regional location and teaching phase) had no influence on their perceptions. The findings are discussed and suggestions are made with regard to measures to improve the efficiency of school governing bodies.

### Introduction

Changes in the governance of education have taken place world-wide, as outlined below. One of the most important reforms in England and Wales as well as in South Africa was the devolution of responsibilities to governing bodies. The aim of these changes was to put governing bodies and principals under pressure of public accountability (Department of Education and Science, 1992:18).

School governing bodies were already in existence in England and Wales as early as 1980s (Farrell & Law, 1999:5). They took over responsibilities for overall administration of schools from local education authorities. The assumption was that governing bodies would be better able to manage and be accountable than local education authorities (Farrell & Law, 1999:5). The legislation called Education Act 1980 made it compulsory for each school in England and Wales to have a governing body and for this purpose it established the requirement for parental and teacher representation (Field, 1993:1; Farrell & Law, 1999:5). This legislation was driven partly by a desire to promote local accountability in schools (Beckett, Bell & Rhodes, 1991:9; Thomlison, 1993:12). In other nations' education systems, similar bodies to English and Welsh school governors exist as mechanisms for school accountability. For example, New Zealand's Board of Trustees most closely parallels England's and Wales's governing bodies. Most European and Commonwealth countries have types of advisory, part-time, elected school governing boards (Thody & Punter, 2000:185).

With the advent of the Government of National Unity on the 27th of April 1994, changes in school governance have also taken place in South Africa. School committees have been replaced by governing bodies. The South African Schools Act No. 84 of 1996 makes provision for both governance and professional management of public schools (South African Schools Act, 1996:9). The Schools Act (South African Schools Act, 1996:9) stipulates that the governing body, which is a statutory body of elected people, is responsible for governing the school whilst the principal, under the authority of the Head of Department, is responsible for professional management. School governance, with regard to the governing body's functions, means determining the policy and rules by which the school is to be organised and controlled. On the other hand, professional management refers to the day-to-day administration and organisation of teaching and learning at the school and to the performance of the departmental responsibilities that are prescribed by law (Potgieter, Visser, Van der Bank, Mothata & Squelch, 1997:11). Maile (2002:331) argues that it is not enough to simply state that parents are responsible for school governance and principals deal with professional management without clearly demarcating roles and indicating their meeting point. The topic of apportionment of duties and responsibilities between governance and management is regarded as important to the effectiveness of schools (Early, 1994; Audit Commission and OFSTED, 1995; Deem, Brehony & Heath, 1995; Esp & Saran, 1995; Corrick, 1996; Department of Education, 1996).

Potgieter *et al.* (1997:23) and South African Schools Act (1996:

9) maintain that the general purpose of a governing body is to perform efficiently its functions in terms of the Schools Act on behalf of the school and for the benefit of the school community. They further maintain that a governing body is placed in a position of trust towards a school. In other words, a governing body is expected to act in good faith, to carry out all duties and functions on behalf of a school and to be accountable for its actions. The accountability of school governing bodies to their constituencies is implicated in Section 18 (2) (b) and (2) (e) of the South African Schools Act (South African Schools Act, 1996:9). Section 18 (2) (b) states that a constitution of the governing body must provide for meetings of the governing body with parents, learners, educators and other staff at the school, respectively, at least once a year. Section 18 (2) (e) states that a constitution of the governing body must provide for rendering a report on its activities to parents, learners, educators and other staff at the school, respectively, at least once a year. Section (20) (9) of the South African Schools Act, 1996 provides that the governing body should present an annual report.

Farrel and Law (1997:7) assert that there is limited evidence from literature about the effectiveness of governing body accountability, or governors' perceptions of accountability. There is a suggestion however, that 'governing bodies are not particularly accountable' (Deem, *et al.*, 1995:38) and that 'governors are not performing effectively their overt functions of democratic representation and the direction of managerial effectiveness and efficiency' (Thody, 1994:210). Deem *et al.* (1995:166) argue that 'few mechanisms are in place to make governors accountable to those whose interests they represent'. In their study of governing bodies they found that no governor had been removed from his or her post. Levacic (1995:30) similarly states that there is an absence of 'hotly contested elections' in the majority of schools. Hence, few governors will have sanctions imposed. Lello (1993:1) maintains that as much as the principal is accountable to the Department, to the school governing body, to the teachers, to the parents and learners, by the same token the school governing body should be accountable to these stakeholders. Davidoff and Lazarus (1997:98) assert that the school governing body is representative of all stakeholders and each constituency mandates people to represent their interests, consequently, representatives are then held accountable to those who elected them.

In his study that he conducted in South Africa, Maile (2002) emphasises the importance of accountability of school governing bodies for the purpose of school development. He states that every stakeholder or member of the school governing body must be prepared to play his/her part actively.

It appears that if school bodies were accountable to their stakeholders their efficiency would improve. However, Maile (2002:329) remarks that illiteracy among the members of school governing bodies, which is specially the case in the rural areas, may contribute to their inefficiency. He argues that this is possible because illiteracy precludes parents from accessing relevant management information from the principal.

Unfortunately, the concept of school governing body is relatively new in South Africa compared to other countries. Hence there are few studies that have been conducted on the topic. Most of these studies (Bisschoff & Phakoa, 1999; Ngcobo, 1999; Heystek, 2001; Thwala, 2001) focus on learners as stakeholders in the school governing body. A study by Zulu (2000) concentrates on the role of parents. Literature from other countries, such as England, is in abundance.

### Problem statement

Very few, if any, studies have attempted to investigate educators' perceptions of the efficiency of school governing bodies. According to Section 23 of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Education Law and Policy Handbook, 1999:21), the governing body of an ordinary public school is made up of three groups of people, namely, members who are elected, the school principal, and members who are co-opted, but not elected. Co-opted members are people from the community. Elected members are: parents of learners at the school, excluding parents employed at that school; educators at the school; members of staff at the school who are not educators; and learners at the school who are in Grade 8 or higher. Although the Act stipulates that parent members must comprise one more than the combined total of other members of a governing body who have voting rights (Potgieter *et al.*, 1997:25), educators are important stakeholders in the school because they interact daily with learners during the process of teaching and learning. Therefore, the efficiency or inefficiency of the governing body has a direct impact on them. It is therefore appropriate to investigate their perceptions of the efficiency of governing bodies in their respective schools.

Brehony and Deem (1995:83) reported in their study that they conducted in England that the possession of accurate and up-to-date knowledge about education was relatively rare amongst lay governors (members of school governing body who are not professional educators). This observation was also made previously (Deem & Brehony, 1993a). These authors concluded that inaccurate, inappropriate or erroneous knowledge about education could act as a barrier to adequate performance of governors' responsibilities. They furthermore argue that it is not only in knowledge terms that lay governors lacking familiarity with the education system are distinguishable from professional educators but that lay governors' (members of school governing body who are not professional educators) values about education may also sometimes differ sharply from those of professional educators.

The present study, therefore, attempts to unravel the problem of the efficiency of the school governing bodies as perceived by educators. More specifically, the present study attempts to find answers to these research questions:

1. To what extent do educators perceive school governing bodies to be efficient?
2. To what extent do educators' biographical variables such as gender, regional location, and teaching phase influence their perceptions of the efficiency of school governing bodies?

### Concept clarification

In this study, the term educator refers to a teacher. South African Schools Act (1996:2) also refers to a teacher as an educator. Several authors have adopted this definition (Potgieter *et al.*, 1997). Perception in this study shall mean judgement or impression. Perception has always been defined in this context (Ndlovu, 1993:11; Mzulwini, 1996:8). The term 'school governing body' refers to a statutory body of people who are elected to govern a school, namely members who are elected, the school principal, and members who are co-opted but not elected (South African Schools Act, 1996: 12; Potgieter *et al.*, 1997:23; Education Law and Policy Handbook, 1999:21).

### Method

#### Aims of study

The present study aimed at achieving two objectives. First, to establish

the extent to which educators perceive the efficiency of the school governing bodies in performing their functions. Second, to determine whether educators' biographical variables (gender, regional location, and teaching phase) have any influence on their perceptions of the efficiency of school governing bodies.

### Hypotheses

Two theoretical hypotheses were formulated. The first hypothesis is that educators do not differ in the extent to which they perceive the efficiency of the school governing bodies in performing their functions. The second hypothesis is that educators' biographical variables (gender, regional location, and teaching phase) have no influence on their perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies.

### Participants

Participants for this study were drawn from educators who were registered for the National Professional Diploma in Education (NPDE) with the University of Zululand. These educators came from the two educational regions of KwaZulu-Natal, namely, Empangeni and Ulundi. The participants had volunteered to participate in the study. This was done in accordance with accidental non-probability sampling design (Table 1).

**Table 1** Distribution of participants according to biographical variables (N = 175)

Gender		Region		Teaching phase		
Male	Female	Empangeni	Ulundi	F	I	S
52	123	68	107	69	53	53

F = Foundation phase; I = Intermediate phase; S = Senior phase

Table 1 illustrates the distribution of educators in accordance with their biographical variables, namely, gender, region and teaching phase. Participants included 175 educators, exclusively from previous black schools. All educators that attended lectures completed the questionnaire. The majority (70%) were females. The majority (61%) were from Ulundi region.

### Measures

#### Questionnaire

The questionnaire was used as a research instrument for collecting data. The questionnaire was appropriate for eliciting and rating responses based on the functions of the school governing body. The questionnaire was also appropriate for quantitative analysis of data. It consisted of two sections covering the aims of study. The first section consisted of educators' biographical information, namely gender, regional location, and teaching phase. The second section consisted of the School Governing Bodies Efficiency Scale (SGBES).

#### School Governing Bodies Efficiency Scale (SGBES)

Informed by the functions of the governing body of a public school which are encapsulated in Section 20(1) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, as amended by the Education Laws Amendment Act of 1997 (Education Law and Policy Handbook, 1999:17; Potgieter *et al.*, 1997:14), the researcher developed the School Governing Bodies Efficiency Scale (SGBES). This is a five-point scale. Respondents were asked to indicate the efficiency of their school governing bodies on each of the functions listed. The ratings were: not efficient (1), slightly efficient (2), efficient (3), very efficient (4), extremely efficient (5). The internal-consistency reliability for this study, using Cronbach's coefficient alpha, was .95. This was a very high reliability.

The SGBES consists of 22 items. The highest possible score on this scale is  $22 \times 5 = 110$  and the lowest possible score is  $22 \times 1 = 22$ . This continuum of 22–110 was arbitrarily divided into three categories, namely: 22–50 indicating a low efficiency level (LEL); 51–80 a moderate efficiency level (MEL); and 81–110 showing a high effi-

ciency level (HEL). Thus the respondent's summated score was classified accordingly into one of these three categories. This procedure yielded data to fulfil the first aim. Data obtained through this procedure were also used together with those of the educators' biographical data in order to meet the second aim of the present study.

**Procedures**

The researcher personally administered the questionnaire to the participants while they were attending lectures. Respondents were asked to complete the research instrument during their spare time. An explanation of the nature of the instrument and the purpose of the investigation preceded the administration.

The analysis of data involved both descriptive and inferential statistics. In order to understand how the respondents responded to each item, data were summarized by averaging group scores (Table 2). When the mean or average for the responses to each item was converted to the nominal categories, it gave an indication of the group's response to a particular item (Orlich, 1978:141; Henerson, Morris & Fitz-Gibbon, 1987:17). Inferential statistics were used to test the hypotheses of the study. Inferential statistics are used to determine whether differences between groups are due to chance or not (Orlich, 1978:144). They are also used for generalising from a sample to make inferences about a wider population (Borg & Gall, 1983:356).

**Results**

Table 2 shows that functions related to finance were ranked high. It also reveals that functions associated with curriculum decisions were ranked the lowest. This gives an indication that the school governing bodies had considerably more knowledge about financial matters than about curriculum issues. However, it is worth noting that when the mean or average for the responses to each item was converted to the nominal categories, the highest mean score was 3.26, which falls within the 'efficient' category. This means that, on average, there was no function in which the school governing bodies were rated as very efficient or extremely efficient.

**Table 2** Rank order of group responses to items 1–22 (N = 175)

Rank order	Function	Mean	SD
1	Opening and maintaining a bank account for the school	3.26	1.31
2	Submitting budget to parents	3.20	1.35
3	Preparing an annual budget	3.18	1.33
4	Keeping the financial records of the school	3.17	1.31
5	Contributing and maintaining school property, buildings and grounds	3.16	1.27
6	Ensuring that school fees are collected	3.10	1.27
7	Developing the mission statement of the school	2.95	1.23
8	Starting and administering a school fund	2.95	1.27
9	Drawing a code of conduct for learners at school	2.90	1.24
10	Supporting the principal and staff in carrying professional functions	2.90	1.31
11	Drawing a constitution for the school	2.87	1.25
12	Meeting with or consulting parents, learners and educators	2.78	1.34
13	Promoting the best interest of the school	2.77	1.04
14	Providing quality education for learners at school	2.77	1.16
15	Deciding on school times	2.74	1.18
16	Recommending to HOD on appointment of educators	2.67	1.19
17	Encouraging parents, learners and staff to render voluntary services	2.64	1.23
18	Buying textbooks, educational materials or equipment for school	2.46	1.38
19	Trying to add to the State funds to improve quality of education	2.46	1.32
20	Recommending to HOD on appointment of non-educators	2.39	1.18
21	Deciding on choice of subjects	2.24	1.19
22	Deciding on the extra-mural curriculum	2.14	1.17

With regard to aim number one (Table 3), the Chi-square test indicated that significant difference was found among the low efficiency level (LEL), moderate efficiency level (MEL) and high ef-

iciency level (HEL) groups. This finding showed that educators differ in the extent to which they perceive the efficiency of the school governing bodies. The three groups of efficiency levels differ among themselves. Put differently, the existence of these three groups is not due to chance factors, which are not statistically significant.

The results of analysis for the second aim (Table 4), revealed that no significant difference was found between males and females with regard to reported efficiency levels. This finding shows that gender had no influence on educators' perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies. Any gender differences pertaining to the three efficiency levels were due to chance factors, not statistically significant.

**Table 3** Respondents grouped according to efficiency levels

	LEL (22–50)	MEL (51–80)	HEL (81–110)
Frequencies	35	89	51
$\chi^2 = 26.377$ ;	df = 2;	p < 0.05	

**Table 4** Gender and efficiency levels

	LEL (22–50)	MEL (51–80)	HEL (81–110)
Male	9	28	15
Female	26	61	36
$\chi^2 = 0.400$ ;	df = 2;	p > 0.05	

**Table 5** Region and efficiency levels

	LEL (22–50)	MEL (51–80)	HEL (81–110)
Empangeni	9	28	15
Ulundi	26	61	36
$\chi^2 = 0.406$	df = 2;	p > 0.05	

**Table 6** Teaching phase and efficiency levels

	LEL (22–50)	MEL (51–80)	HEL (81–110)
Foundation	15	30	24
Intermediate	11	30	12
Senior	9	29	15
$\chi^2 = 3.134$ ;	df = 4;	p > 0.05	

Table 5 indicates that no significant difference was found between the Empangeni and Ulundi regions with regard to reported efficiency levels. This finding showed that the region had no influence on educators' perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies. Any region-related differences pertaining to the three efficiency levels were due to chance factors, which are not statistically significant.

Table 6 indicates that no significant difference was found among Foundation phase, Intermediate phase and Senior phase with regard to efficiency levels reported. This finding showed that teaching phase had no influence on educators' perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies. Any teaching phase-related differences pertaining to the three efficiency levels were due to chance factors, which are not statistically significant.

**Discussion**

The findings revealed that educators differed in the extent to which they perceive the efficiency of the school governing bodies. A higher percentage of educators (51%) reported a moderate level of efficiency compared to those who reported a low level (20%) and those who reported a high level (29%). This means that the majority of educators perceived the school governing bodies to be moderately efficient. There may be several reasons for the mediocrity found among school governing bodies. One of the reasons may be that in spite of provisions

made by the South African Schools Act for initial training programme to empower new governing bodies to perform their functions as well as further training to promote and boost their effective performance, such training is not forthcoming. If it is, it may not be adequate. Previous studies have also shown that there is a need to train members of school governing bodies on South African Schools Act (Bisschoff & Phakoa, 1999:93; Maile, 2002:330).

The findings also indicated that educators' biographical factors, namely gender, regional location, and teaching phase had no influence on their perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies. This means that educators' general perceptions of the efficiency of the school governing bodies is the same.

With regard to the order of functions ranked by educators, although finance-related functions were ranked high, they all fell within efficient category, which is moderate. In none of these functions were school governing bodies perceived to be very or extremely efficient. This indicated that among the members of the school governing bodies, those who were dealing with finance matters were fairly good. These findings are contrary to those of Bisschoff and Phakoa (1999:93) which revealed that there is a need for training the members of school governing bodies with respect to financial management.

The functions of the school governing bodies that were ranked high after finance were those related to drawing policies. These functions included, *inter alia*, drawing mission statement, code of conduct and constitution of the school. This showed that the members of the school governing bodies that are responsible for drawing policies were doing a better job.

The functions on which the school governing bodies were ranked the lowest were those related to curriculum issues. This indicated that the members of the school governing bodies who were dealing with curriculum matters were perceived not to be doing their job well.

Educators were expected to evaluate full school governing bodies, not just the parents, on their functions. The reason why educators perceive school governing bodies not to be very or extremely efficient may, therefore, be based on the failure of the latter to perform or deliver to the expectations of the former. Although not all educators who completed the questionnaire were members of the school governing body, as professionals they are in a better position to observe and pass judgement on the efficiency of school governing bodies in their respective schools. It is not necessary that all of them be part of the school governing body to be able to express their perceptions. Moreover, educators are updated by principals on matters affecting their schools, including decisions taken by school governing bodies. Apart from the principal, educators have representatives in the school governing bodies who inform them about the activities of the school governing bodies. Lastly, findings from educators who are not members of the school governing body are less biased than those from the members.

## Conclusion

My conclusion from the findings of this study is that educators generally perceive the school governing bodies to be moderately efficient. Therefore, there appears to be a need to improve their efficiency. Providing training programmes for the members of school governing bodies in the form of seminars or workshops can play an important role in this regard. Another conclusion is that the school governing bodies are poor in curriculum-related activities. My recommendation is that school governing bodies should try to elect parents who have curriculum-related expertise. Alternatively, they should use the services of educators that are serving in their school governing bodies. These educators can be used as members of curriculum committees or in educating parents on curriculum-related issues.

The above measures may go a long way towards improving the efficiency level of school governing bodies in all aspects of governance. They may also make a vital contribution towards whole school development.

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