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Leveraging school–community relations for transformative governance in historically disadvantaged South African schools

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Abstract

The establishment of democratic governance structures in South African schools was intended to promote participation, accountability, and equity in educational leadership. Despite these reforms, many historically disadvantaged schools continue to experience governance challenges characterized by limited stakeholder participation, unequal power relations, and inadequate governance capacity. This study explored how school–community relationships can be leveraged to promote transformative governance in historically disadvantaged schools in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa. Guided by John Rawls' Social Justice Theory and Community Participation Frameworks, the study adopted a qualitative research design underpinned by a phenomenological approach. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews involving three school principals and twenty School Governing Body (SGB) members, including parents, educators, learner representatives, and community stakeholders. Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The findings revealed that communities possess considerable expertise in areas such as financial management, leadership, governance, and community development; however, these capabilities are often underutilised within school governance structures. The study further found that limited communication, power imbalances, inadequate stakeholder participation, and insufficient training of SGB members constrain effective governance. The findings suggest that transformative governance can be strengthened through structured community engagement, capacity building, participatory decision-making, and

deliberate recognition of community expertise. The study concludes that sustainable school improvement requires governance approaches that move beyond compliance and actively promote inclusion, collaboration, equity, and social justice. The study recommends strengthening school–community partnerships, institutionalising stakeholder participation mechanisms, and investing in the continuous professional development of School Governing Body members.

Key terms: Transformative governance, community participation, school governance, social justice, School Governing Bodies, South Africa

1.0 INTRODUCTION

1.1 Background of the Study

Since the advent of democracy in 1994, South Africa has undertaken significant educational reforms aimed at addressing historical inequalities and promoting democratic participation in schools. One of the most notable reforms was the introduction of School Governing Bodies (SGBs) through the South African Schools Act (SASA) of 1996, which institutionalised stakeholder participation in school governance. These reforms sought to democratise educational leadership by providing parents, educators, learners, and community representatives with opportunities to participate in decision-making processes.

Despite these policy advances, substantial disparities persist between historically advantaged and historically disadvantaged schools. Many schools located in rural and township communities continue to face governance challenges associated with poverty, limited resources, inadequate leadership capacity, and weak stakeholder participation. These challenges hinder the realisation of transformative governance, which emphasizes participation, accountability, social justice, inclusivity, and ethical leadership.

Historically disadvantaged communities often possess valuable human and social capital that remains largely untapped. Within these communities are individuals with expertise in education, finance, law, leadership, entrepreneurship, and community development. When effectively integrated into governance structures, such expertise has the potential to strengthen school leadership, improve accountability, and enhance educational outcomes. However, evidence suggests that community participation often remains limited and symbolic rather than substantive.

This study investigates how stronger school–community relationships can be leveraged to promote transformative governance in historically disadvantaged schools.

1.2 Statement of the Problem

Although South African education policy promotes democratic and participatory governance, meaningful community participation remains limited in many historically disadvantaged schools. School Governing Bodies frequently experience capacity constraints, inadequate training, role ambiguity, and unequal power relations that restrict effective stakeholder participation. Consequently, community resources, expertise, and knowledge are often underutilised in governance processes.

The limited involvement of communities raises critical concerns regarding the effectiveness of governance structures in addressing historical inequalities and promoting educational transformation. There remains insufficient understanding of how school–community relationships can be strengthened to facilitate transformative governance and improve educational leadership in disadvantaged contexts.

1.3 Research Objectives

The study sought to:

1. Explore stakeholders' experiences of school governance in historically disadvantaged schools.
2. Examine the nature and extent of community participation in governance processes.
3. Identify barriers to effective school–community collaboration.
4. Propose strategies for leveraging community expertise to promote transformative governance.

1.4 Research Questions

The study was guided by the following questions:

1. How do stakeholders experience school governance in historically disadvantaged schools?
2. What is the nature and extent of community participation in school governance?
3. What barriers hinder effective school–community collaboration?
4. How can community expertise be leveraged to strengthen transformative governance?

2.0 LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Theoretical Framework

2.1.1 Social Justice Theory

This study is grounded in John Rawls' Social Justice Theory (Rawls, 1971), which emphasizes fairness, equity, and the redistribution of opportunities to benefit disadvantaged members of society. Within educational contexts, social justice requires governance structures that empower marginalized groups, promote equitable participation, and ensure fair access to educational opportunities and resources.

Applied to school governance, Rawls' theory suggests that decision-making processes should actively include traditionally excluded stakeholders and create mechanisms that support meaningful participation by disadvantaged communities.

2.1.2 Community Participation Frameworks

Community Participation Frameworks highlight the importance of collaborative decision-making, shared responsibility, and collective ownership of development initiatives. These frameworks argue that effective governance emerges when stakeholders participate actively in planning, implementation, monitoring, and evaluation processes.

In educational settings, meaningful community participation strengthens accountability, responsiveness, and legitimacy while promoting stronger partnerships between schools and their communities.

2.2 School Governance in South Africa

Research indicates that school governance in South Africa remains characterized by uneven stakeholder participation. While School Governing Bodies have expanded opportunities for participation, challenges relating to governance capacity, limited training, and unequal power relations continue to constrain their

effectiveness (Mncube, 2021; Msila, 2022).

Parents and community members often experience difficulties participating meaningfully in governance processes because of limited confidence, inadequate knowledge of governance procedures, and educator dominance during decision-making.

2.3 Community Participation and School Effectiveness

Community participation has consistently been identified as a critical contributor to school effectiveness. Studies indicate that schools characterized by stronger community partnerships tend to demonstrate improved accountability, learner outcomes, leadership effectiveness, and resource mobilisation (Naidoo, 2023; Xaba, 2021; Heystek, 2020).

However, participation is frequently limited to consultation, fundraising, or attendance at meetings rather than meaningful involvement in governance decisions that shape school development.

2.4 Transformative Governance

Transformative governance extends beyond compliance with policy requirements. It emphasizes inclusive leadership, participatory decision-making, social justice, ethical accountability, and collaborative problem-solving (Sayed & Motala, 2021; Spaull, 2023).

Transformative governance requires school leaders to recognize communities as strategic partners capable of contributing valuable expertise and resources toward educational improvement.

3.0 METHODOLOGY

3.1 Research Design

The study adopted a qualitative research design using a phenomenological approach to explore stakeholders' lived experiences of school governance and community participation.

3.2 Research Sites

Three historically disadvantaged schools located in the Eastern Cape Province of South Africa were purposively selected. The selected schools represented rural and township contexts characterized by socioeconomic challenges and governance constraints.

3.3 Participants

Participants comprised:

- Three school principals;
- Twenty School Governing Body members;
- Parent representatives;
- Educator representatives;
- Community representatives; and
- Learner Representative Council (LRC) members.

Purposive sampling was used to select participants who possessed direct experience of governance processes within the selected schools.

3.4 Data Collection

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews that enabled participants to share their experiences, perceptions, and reflections regarding governance and community participation.

3.5 Data Analysis

Data were analysed using thematic analysis. The analysis involved coding interview transcripts, identifying recurring patterns, developing themes, and interpreting findings within the context of transformative governance and social justice.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Ethical principles of informed consent, voluntary participation, confidentiality, anonymity, and respect for participants' dignity were observed throughout the study. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study and their right to withdraw at any stage without penalty.

4.0 FINDINGS

4.1 Underutilisation of Community Expertise

The findings revealed that communities possess substantial expertise in areas such as financial management, legal affairs, leadership, project management, and community development. Despite these capabilities, participants reported that schools rarely identify or utilise community expertise within governance processes.

Participants expressed frustration that governance structures often overlook available community resources, resulting in missed opportunities for strengthening decision-making and school development initiatives.

4.2 Limited Engagement and Communication

Participants consistently reported limited interaction between schools and communities. Meetings occurred infrequently and often experienced low attendance due to poor communication and insufficient advance notice.

The findings suggest that weak communication channels undermine trust, limit stakeholder participation, and constrain collaborative problem-solving between schools and communities.

4.3 Power Imbalances in Governance

The study found that governance processes were frequently dominated by principals and educators. Parents, community representatives, and learner representatives often perceived themselves as passive recipients of information rather than active participants in decision-making.

These governance practices restricted meaningful participation and undermined democratic governance principles envisioned in South African education policy.

4.4 Lack of Training and Capacity Building

Participants highlighted inadequate training as a major constraint affecting participation in governance processes. Many School Governing Body members reported uncertainty regarding their responsibilities and governance roles.

The lack of continuous professional development reduced members' confidence and limited their capacity to contribute effectively during governance discussions and decision-making processes.

5.0 DISCUSSION

5.1 Community Expertise as an Untapped Governance Resource

The study demonstrates that historically disadvantaged communities possess significant human capital that remains largely underutilised within school governance structures. This finding supports literature emphasizing the importance of community knowledge as a critical resource for educational improvement.

The limited utilisation of community expertise reflects broader governance challenges whereby schools continue to operate within traditional structures that fail to recognise community members as equal governance partners.

5.2 Participation and Transformative Governance

The findings reveal a substantial gap between policy intentions and governance realities. Although legislation promotes democratic participation, governance practices frequently limit meaningful engagement by parents, learners, and community members.

Transformative governance requires schools to move beyond symbolic participation and establish structures that enable stakeholders to influence decisions that affect educational outcomes and school development.

5.3 Power Relations and Democratic Governance

The dominance of school leadership in decision-making suggests the persistence of hierarchical governance models. Such practices undermine principles of inclusivity, accountability, and shared responsibility.

Schools that embrace participatory governance are more likely to benefit from diverse perspectives, enhanced stakeholder commitment, and stronger community support.

5.4 Capacity Building and Governance Effectiveness

The study highlights the importance of continuous training and professional development for School Governing Body members. Effective participation requires governance knowledge, leadership competencies, financial literacy, and policy awareness.

Investment in capacity building can increase stakeholder confidence and strengthen governance

effectiveness in historically disadvantaged schools.

5.5 Theoretical Implications

The findings support Rawls' Social Justice Theory by demonstrating that equitable governance requires the active inclusion of historically marginalized stakeholders in decision-making processes. The exclusion or underrepresentation of parents, learners, and community members contradicts principles of fairness and equal participation.

The findings also reinforce Community Participation Frameworks, which emphasize collaborative governance, shared ownership, and stakeholder empowerment. The evidence suggests that transformative governance is most likely to emerge when schools intentionally create opportunities for meaningful participation, recognise community expertise, and establish partnerships grounded in mutual trust and accountability.

6.0 STUDY LIMITATIONS

This study was conducted in only three historically disadvantaged schools within the Eastern Cape Province. Consequently, the findings may not be generalisable to all South African schools.

Furthermore, the study relied on self-reported experiences gathered through interviews, which may have been influenced by participant perceptions and biases. To enhance credibility, data were collected from multiple stakeholder groups, allowing for triangulation of perspectives and strengthening trustworthiness.

Future studies could employ mixed-method approaches and include a larger number of schools across different provinces to generate broader insights into transformative school governance.

7.0 CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

7.1 Conclusion

This study explored how school–community relationships can be leveraged to promote transformative governance in historically disadvantaged South African schools. The findings demonstrate that communities possess significant expertise and resources capable of strengthening governance processes. However, weak communication, limited stakeholder participation, unequal power relations, and inadequate governance training continue to undermine transformative governance efforts.

The study concludes that meaningful community participation represents a critical pathway toward achieving inclusive, accountable, ethical, and socially just school governance.

7.2 Recommendations

Structured Community Engagement Frameworks

Schools should establish formal structures that facilitate regular, meaningful, and sustained engagement between schools and communities.

Capacity Building for School Governing Bodies

Education authorities should provide continuous professional development programmes focusing on

leadership, governance, financial management, conflict resolution, and policy implementation.

Recognition of Community Expertise

Schools should systematically identify, document, and utilise the professional expertise available within local communities.

Strengthening Communication Systems

Schools should implement transparent, accessible, and consistent communication mechanisms that promote stakeholder participation and trust.

Participatory Decision-Making

School leaders should adopt collaborative governance practices that ensure meaningful stakeholder engagement in strategic planning, budgeting, policy development, and school improvement initiatives.

8.0 CONTRIBUTION TO KNOWLEDGE

This study contributes to the field of educational leadership and governance by:

1. Demonstrating the untapped potential of community expertise in strengthening school governance.
2. Extending social justice perspectives within educational governance discourse.
3. Providing context-specific evidence from historically disadvantaged South African schools.
4. Offering practical strategies for enhancing transformative governance through community participation.
5. Strengthening understanding of how school–community partnerships can promote educational transformation and accountability.

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