Examining the Political Influences on School Governance in South Africa: A Case Study of the Zululand District

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Abstract

This research examines the impact of political party affiliations and interference on school management in the Zululand District of South Africa. Using an interpretive research approach and qualitative methods, including an extensive review of existing literature and data collection through interviews, the study conducts semi-structured interviews with 21 individuals from three public primary schools. It also explores the influence of political factors on School Governing Bodies (SGBs), including their involvement in party politics and the challenges they face in enhancing their capacities. The findings confirm significant political interference in school governance, particularly in rural areas where political affiliations influence decision-making. SGBs often align themselves with political parties, leading to governance inefficiencies and conflicts among parent governors. Through the lens of participatory democratic theory, the study reveals governance capture in rural schools, with discriminatory practices and corruption arising as consequences of political intervention. The recommendations call for empowering SGBs to navigate political pressures through policy reforms, ensuring autonomy for parent governors, and reassessing the permissible extent of political influence within the governance framework. Additionally, the Department of Basic Education (DBE) is urged to address socioeconomic factors exacerbating corruption and to uphold integrity within school governance structures. By addressing the influence of politics and enhancing transparency, the DBE can cultivate a more equitable and effective educational environment for rural South African students.

Keywords: Political Clashes, Political Alliances, Strategic Leadership, Servant Leadership

Introduction

The domain of school governance encompasses the administration of quality, curriculum, learning, facilities, infrastructure, finance, educators, non-educators, vision, mission, and goals. In the rural public primary schools of the Zululand District of KwaZulu-Natal, conflicts often arise between parents and school management, as well as among different political groups, reflecting a pattern since the post-colonial era (Ndlovu & Ngwenya, 2017). These conflicts have had significant socio-economic consequences for the district's development (Ndimande, 2015).

It is not uncommon for school governing body (SGB) members to be associated with local, provincial, or national political parties, which can sometimes result in societal politics influencing the school governance structure. This influence has resulted in decision-making being driven by emotions rather than democratic rationality (Mabizela, 2016; Buthelezi & Ajani, 2023). Furthermore, it appears that educational institutions and the Department of Basic Education (DBE) have not yet fully assumed their responsibility to guide SGB parent members regarding their educational responsibilities, ethical conduct, and leadership development (Mncwabe & Vilakazi, 2018; Muremela et al., 2023). Instead, parents have placed their trust in politicians, which has led to political contestations within school governance (Mkhize & Nkosi, 2020).

The study suggests that cultivating future leaders and fostering a commitment to educational values beyond partisan interests may be beneficial (Zondi & Mthembu, 2019; Baloyi et al., 2023). The political context of the district has the potential to influence the vision of school governance in ways that prioritize narrow personal interests over the public good, perpetuating inequalities and compromising the provision of resources for learning and teaching (Mncwango & Mkhize, 2017; Mahaye & Ajani, 2023).

School governance is further complicated by decentralizing governance to communities under the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 (Mbanjwa, 2016). It appears that the involvement of municipal councils and political parties in school governance necessitates examining how political influences shape decision-making processes and exacerbate power struggles among stakeholders within rural public primary schools (Nene, 2018; Mahaye et al., 2023).

Moreover, politics is increasingly influential in school governance. Sometimes, positions within school governing bodies (SGBs) are filled based on political affiliations rather than merit. Such circumstances can give rise to crises within school governance structures, which can have implications for the effective functioning of schools and the delivery of quality education. Furthermore, the study addresses the potential for processes to be manipulated to favor specific individuals and the lack of collaboration between principals and parents due to allegiance to different constituencies (Mthembu & Ntombela, 2017). These challenges

underscore the need to comprehensively examine the political influences on school governance and their implications for educational outcomes (Ngcobo & Nxele, 2018; Buthelezi & Ajani, 2023).

The study draws on existing literature and empirical evidence to contribute to a better understanding of the complex interplay between politics and school governance. This understanding is intended to inform policy and practice interventions to promote transparency, accountability, and effective leadership within rural public primary schools in the Zululand District (Mthembu & Mkhize, 2021).

The research utilizes participatory democratic theory to analyze decision-making processes within South African School Governing Bodies (SGBs), specifically in rural public primary schools in the Zululand District. The theory underscores active stakeholder involvement, which aligns with democratic principles as outlined in the South African Constitution (Bush, 2007; Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011). The study seeks to uncover challenges among parents, teachers, and school management, to evaluate stakeholder engagement to enhance representation, accountability, and transparency in SGBs.

Previous studies indicate that stakeholder participation fosters commitment and productivity, which are crucial for effective governance (Rafiq & Chisti, 2011; Muremela et al., 2023). Participatory democracy is essential for addressing the legacy of apartheid, fostering social cohesion, and mitigating inequalities by encouraging participation from marginalized groups (Smit & Oosthuizen, 2011; Baloyi et al., 2023). This is particularly pertinent in Zululand, where poverty and social exclusion are prevalent. The research delves into historical and contemporary political influences on school governance and the impact of SGB members' political affiliations, offering recommendations to enhance transparency, accountability, and effectiveness in school governance (Karlsson, 2002).

The study examines how political influences affect school governance in rural public primary schools in the Zululand District. It will investigate the impact of political affiliations and activities of SGB members on decision-making processes and school functionality. The study also aims to propose ways to reduce the negative effects of politics on school governance and improve transparency, accountability, and effectiveness. The goal is to understand better how politics affect the region's quality and fairness of education.

Methods

The research methodology was rooted in an interpretive paradigm and a qualitative approach, employing a case study design and purposive sampling. These methods were selected to reveal the intricate dynamics of political influences on

school governance in rural public primary schools in the Zululand District (Cohen et al., 2011; Creswell, 2014; Maree, 2007).

The study employed a case study approach to explore political influences on schools. This method entailed a comprehensive examination of specific programs, events, or activities, offering in-depth insights into stakeholders' attitudes, emotions, and experiences in school governance (Rule & John, 2011). Data was gathered through observation, document analysis, and semi-structured interviews with principals, teachers, parents, and School Governing Body (SGB) chairpersons. Purposive sampling was utilized to choose participants aligned with the research objectives, ensuring diverse perspectives within the population of interest. The sample size is detailed in Table 1.

Table 1

Sample size

School Names	Principal	Departmental Head	PL1 Teacher	SGB Chairperson	Ordinary Parent Member	Total
School A	1	1	2	1	2	7 per school
School B	1	1	2	1	2	7 per school
School C	1	1	2	1	2	7 per school
				Total sample size =		21 participants

Data triangulation was utilized to enhance the validity and reliability of the findings (Creswell, 2012). The data was analyzed using thematic analysis, which involved identifying patterns and themes within the data (Krippendorf, 2013). This analytical process included pattern and theme analysis (Creswell, 2014; Theron & Theron, 2014), aiding in interpreting and presenting participant data.

Results

Collected data was systematically analyzed, following Braun and Clarke's (2006) steps, to generate themes for in-depth information on the participants' experiences. Thus, findings from 7 participants from each of the three schools have been interpretively unpacked in the presentation of the findings in this section below:

The Impact of Politics on Governance at a School Level

According to a study by Zenda (2021), there is significant evidence of limited parent participation in school governance, with a notable emphasis on political agendas. The study highlights the influence of politics on school governance, particularly regarding the repercussions stemming from parents or teachers engaging in political activities. The study's findings validate the observation that certain parents exhibit a lack of interest in participating in School Governing Bodies

(SGBs), with one cited reason being the political intimidation exerted by other parent governors. This was supported by SGB 2, who said, *"I agreed to be a governor because no other parent was willing to be a member."* Participant E3 concurred by further saying: "*The problem takes place during the SGB elections. When parents are allowed to show off their political allegiance during elections, no one stops that. You should know that the SGB structure is dysfunctional from the word go. When parents choose their political organizations against school issues, I tell you that school would be dysfunctional. It would lose its direction. The performance in that school would be poor. The reasons behind these acts may be poverty and money. So SGBs think they would get things like tenders in the school, grass cutting projects, repairs if they remain loyal to their political organizations*".

The reluctance of specific individuals to participate in school governance may necessitate reassessing the requirements and election processes for school governors, as those who are unwilling might struggle to collaborate with other members due to apprehension. This observation aligns with the concept identified by Stier, Bleier, Lietz, and Strohmaier (2018) as political maneuvering during SGB elections, wherein politicians strategically deploy their supporters for political advantage. Despite the negative effects of politics on school governance, the research findings also shed light on the perspective that not all aspects of political involvement in schooling are detrimental. As highlighted in a study by Montiel, Uyheng, and Dela Paz (2021), effective navigation of political dynamics is deemed crucial for success in school governance. SMT 2 had this to say:

" Personally, *I have a different experience. You see, when you ask for things in this Department, especially since I am a woman, the Circuit Managers, even other male principals, take you for granted. That is why I keep myself associated with politics and politicians so that when I am refused, I call my connections to get what I seek. When I took over as the principal, the school struggled with water and playgrounds, yet the same officials who are ever telling us as principals that learners should be allowed to play. They cannot even provide the school with a soccer ball, so I use my political connections to work for me because politicians enjoy giving these little things to the public since they use them to get voted*".

SMT 1 further supported this by saying:

" *A long time ago, schools had no norms and standards allocation. Today, we say schools manage their own money because politics has contributed to changing how schools are run. Our learners enjoy free education just because somebody refused to be silent and voiced that concern through political forums. Again, politics positively contributed to the school. When I arrived, the school had no cleaner, but because parents complained in the war room, the school used learners to clean the toilets. Politicians tried to talk to the Social Development Department, as I am speaking to you, the school has a cleaner through politics*".

In alignment with the perspectives of SMT 1 and SMT 2, SMT 3 expressed the following viewpoint: "*When politics takes control, it often leads to poor school*

performance. However*, consider the concept of a war room. I believe it can be beneficial if it operates within its designated mandate. In these war rooms, representatives from various departments, such as the Police, Social Development, Health, and Politicians, convene. When politicians or community members raise concerns or complaints, one of these department representatives strives to address the issue effectively. In this way, I believe service delivery is achieved.*"

The statements above highlight the nuanced nature of political influence. As Jonah, Nwachukwu, Nanah, and Umoh (2021) indicate, politics is an inevitable aspect of society, with outcomes contingent upon how different groups manage it. According to their perspective, politics can yield either negative or positive results, depending on its execution and impact on school governance. These discussions underscore the potential for effective political management to result in cost savings for schools and the acquisition of additional resources through donations from politicians or political parties.

Relationship between Parent and Teacher Governors

Relationship refers to the interactions and behaviors between individuals or groups. As Szafruga (2021) noted, politics encompasses activities related to group decision-making and power dynamics among individuals, including allocating resources or status. It involves social relations that revolve around authority and power. The research findings revealed prevalent power struggles within the school governance structure, predominantly driven by parental influence. There appears to be a lack of cohesion among parents, as observed during a meeting in S2, where groups formed before the meeting, and emotions ran high, resulting in an inability to reach a consensus on agenda items. A parent's assertion exemplified this strained dynamic, namely that excessive power assertion by school governing bodies (SGBs) can escalate tensions and strain relationships.

Similarly, discord among teachers may stem from union divisions and affiliations, rendering SGBs passive governors (Meredith, 2021). Participant SGB 2 highlighted the disunity among parents, particularly those aligned with the school principal, who may disregard teachers' input despite lacking expertise in educational matters, citing their perceived authority within the SGB structure. They may even resort to intimidating teachers by threatening their job security. Participant E3 echoed these sentiments, attributing the discord to political influence propagated by trade unions. They noted a tendency for individuals to be judged based on their affiliations, such as membership in the National Teachers Union (NATU), which may lead to the dismissal of their input based on perceived political alignment. Participant SMT2 emphasized a sense of domination by parents within the SGBs, forming political alliances and lacking respect for the teaching profession, particularly among younger parents involved in governance. These discussions highlight a strained relationship between SGBs and School Management Teams

(SMTs), consistent with findings by Mohapi and Chombo (2021), who identified challenges in collaboration among principals, parent governors, and teacher governors. These authors attribute the friction to SGBs encroaching on professional matters while diminishing the role of teachers and leveraging political positions and powers, particularly in rural primary schools.

Impact of Political Influences on School Management in South Africa

The impact of political influence on school management in South Africa is a complex issue with far-reaching implications, as revealed through the perspectives of various stakeholders involved in the educational system. Participants in discussions and research studies have shed light on the multifaceted effects of political dynamics on school governance and management. One significant impact identified is the politicization of school governance processes, which poses challenges in decision-making and resource allocation. Zenda (2021) highlighted a prevalent lack of parent participation in school governance due to heightened political focus, leading to skewed priorities and inefficiencies in resource distribution. Moreover, Stier et al. (2018) pointed out the phenomenon of political deployment during School Governing Body (SGB) elections, where politicians strategically deploy members to advance political agendas, potentially undermining the integrity of the governance structure. This politicization creates tensions and divisions among stakeholders, impeding effective collaboration and hindering the attainment of educational goals. For instance, SMT3's observation of power struggles within SGBs and the forming of political alliances among parents underscores the divisive nature of political influence (Jonah et al., 2021). Additionally, the reluctance of some participants to engage in governance processes due to political intimidation further exacerbates these tensions (Zenda, 2021).

Despite the negative ramifications of political interference, some participants acknowledge the potential for positive outcomes when politics is effectively navigated in school management. Montiel, Uyheng, and Dela Paz (2021) emphasize the importance of political acumen in achieving success within the educational landscape. This sentiment is echoed by Participant SMT2, who noted that judicious political engagement could result in increased school resources and support. However, navigating political dynamics in school management is fraught with challenges, as evidenced by the strained relationships among stakeholders. SGBs may encroach on professional matters, diminishing the authority of School Management Teams (SMTs) and contributing to discord within the educational ecosystem (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). Moreover, the politicization of educational issues may marginalize certain voices and perspectives, stifling inclusive decision-making processes (Zenda, 2021).

The politicization of school governance has also been linked to resource mismanagement and favoritism in resource allocation. For instance, schools aligned

with certain political factions may receive preferential treatment, while others are neglected, exacerbating existing inequities (Ndimande, 2015). This selective resource distribution undermines the principles of fairness and equality, which are fundamental to effective school governance. Participants have reported that political agendas often overshadow educational priorities, leading to decisions that do not necessarily align with the best interests of the school community (Mkhize & Nkosi, 2020).

Furthermore, the study reveals that political influence extends beyond governance structures to impact the everyday functioning of schools. Teachers and administrators may feel pressured to align with certain political groups to secure their positions or gain favor, which can create a hostile and competitive environment (Buthelezi & Ajani, 2023). This atmosphere of political maneuvering detracts from the primary educational mission of schools and can lead to a decline in morale and professional integrity among staff (Mncwabe & Vilakazi, 2018).

The involvement of political actors in school governance also has implications for accountability and transparency. When political interests dominate school management, there is a risk of corruption and unethical practices, as decisions are made based on political expediency rather than educational merit (Gumede & Zulu, 2020). This undermines public trust in the education system and hampers efforts to implement effective governance reforms (Mkhwanazi, 2019).

The study underscores the importance of training and support for SGB members to navigate political pressures and focus on their educational responsibilities. Effective capacity-building initiatives can empower SGB members to make informed decisions that prioritize the welfare of students and the broader school community (Muremela et al., 2023). Additionally, fostering a culture of collaboration and mutual respect among all stakeholders can mitigate the adverse effects of political influence and promote a more cohesive governance structure (Karlsson, 2002).

To address these challenges, the study calls for comprehensive policy reforms reinforcing the separation of educational governance from political interference. Establishing clear guidelines and protocols for SGB elections and operations can help ensure that governance decisions are made transparently and equitably (Mahaye et al., 2023). Moreover, promoting community engagement and participation in school governance can enhance accountability and ensure that diverse perspectives are represented in decision-making processes (Baloyi et al., 2023).

In conclusion, the impact of political influence on school management in South Africa is multifaceted and complex, with both positive and negative implications. While effective political engagement has the potential to garner support and resources for schools, it can also lead to politicization, division, and inequities within

the educational system. Addressing these challenges requires a nuanced understanding of the intersections between politics and education and concerted efforts to foster inclusive governance processes that prioritize the best interests of learners and their communities. This study highlights the need for ongoing research and policy development to ensure that school governance structures can effectively navigate the complexities of political influence while upholding the principles of equity, transparency, and accountability.

Discussion

The findings of this study delve into the intricate impact of politics on school management in South Africa, as perceived by different stakeholders. One significant discovery is that parents hesitate to actively participate in School Governing Bodies (SGBs) due to perceived political pressure and power struggles (Zenda, 2021). This reluctance highlights the necessity of thoroughly examining the role of politics in influencing parental involvement in educational governance processes. Furthermore, the findings underscore the considerable impact of political figures in SGB elections, where individuals may be strategically utilized to advance political interests (Stier et al., 2018). This not only undermines the credibility of governance structures but also diminishes the autonomy and effectiveness of SGBs in decision-making processes (Buthelezi & Ajani, 2023). The politicization of SGBs can give rise to conflicts of interest and impede the pursuit of educational objectives, as stakeholders prioritize political agendas over the needs of students and schools.

The study also sheds light on the impact of political dynamics on stakeholder relationships within the school ecosystem. Participants' observations of power struggles and political alliances among parents and between SGBs and School Management Teams (SMTs) highlight the divisive nature of political influence (Jonah et al., 2021). These tensions can impede stakeholder collaboration and cooperation, hindering efforts to promote inclusive governance and student-centered decision-making (Mahaye et al., 2023). Furthermore, the findings underscore the challenges faced by teachers in navigating political pressures within the school environment. SMTs may find themselves marginalized or undermined by SGBs that encroach on professional matters and assert political authority (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). This erosion of professional autonomy can contribute to tensions between SMTs and SGBs, compromising the effectiveness of school management and governance. Despite these challenges, some participants recognize the potential for positive outcomes when politics is effectively managed in school management. Montiel, Uyheng, and Dela Paz (2021) suggest that judicious political engagement can increase school resources and support, enhancing the quality of education and learning outcomes. However, achieving these benefits requires a delicate balance between political engagement and educational priorities and a commitment to

inclusive decision-making processes. Moreover, the findings underscore the need for greater transparency and accountability in educational governance to mitigate the negative effects of political interference. Participants emphasized the importance of fostering trust and collaboration among stakeholders and promoting open communication and dialogue (Zenda, 2021). By cultivating a culture of transparency and accountability, educational institutions can enhance stakeholder engagement and promote shared ownership of educational goals and priorities.

Additionally, the discussion highlights the importance of addressing structural inequalities and power imbalances within the educational system. SGBs must strive to reflect the diversity of their communities and ensure equitable representation and participation among all stakeholders (Stier et al., 2018). By promoting inclusivity and diversity in governance structures, educational institutions can foster a sense of belonging and ownership among all school community members. Furthermore, the findings underscore the need for ongoing professional development and capacity-building initiatives to effectively empower teachers and stakeholders to navigate political pressures. SMTs and SGBs require training and support to enhance their leadership skills, promote effective communication, and manage conflicts constructively (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). By investing in professional development programs, educational institutions can build the capacity of their staff and stakeholders to navigate the complexities of political influence on school management effectively. This study's findings highlight the multifaceted nature of political influence on school management in South Africa. While political interference poses significant challenges to effective governance and stakeholder relationships, it also presents opportunities for positive change and collaboration (Baloyi et al., 2023; Muremela et al., 2023). By fostering transparency, accountability, and inclusivity, educational institutions can mitigate the negative effects of political interference and promote a culture of shared ownership and responsibility for educational outcomes.

Based on the insights gleaned from the findings, several recommendations emerge to address the challenges posed by political influence on school management in South Africa. Firstly, there is a pressing need to enhance transparency and accountability within governance structures. Educational institutions should establish clear mechanisms for reporting and oversight to ensure that decision-making processes are transparent and aligned with educational priorities (Zenda, 2021). By promoting transparency, stakeholders can hold governance bodies accountable for their actions and decisions, fostering trust and confidence in the management of schools.

Secondly, efforts should be made to depoliticize school governance structures and elections. Measures such as strengthening criteria for SGB membership and election processes can help mitigate the influence of political agendas (Stier et al., 2018). Additionally, educational authorities should provide guidance and support to

ensure that SGBs operate independently and prioritize the best interests of learners and schools above political considerations. Furthermore, there is a need to foster inclusive and collaborative decision-making processes that engage all stakeholders, including parents, teachers, and community members. Educational institutions should create platforms for dialogue and consultation to solicit input from diverse perspectives and ensure that decisions reflect the needs and aspirations of the entire school community (Montiel et al., 2021). Schools can harness stakeholders' collective wisdom and expertise by promoting inclusivity and collaboration to drive positive change and innovation.

Moreover, professional development programs should be implemented to empower teachers and stakeholders with the skills and knowledge needed to navigate political pressures effectively. Training initiatives should focus on building leadership capacity, promoting effective communication, and resolving conflicts constructively (Mohapi & Chombo, 2021). By investing in the professional development of staff and stakeholders, educational institutions can equip them with the tools and resources to effectively manage political influence and contribute to the overall improvement of school management.

Lastly, policymakers and educational authorities should prioritize addressing structural inequalities and promoting equitable representation within governance structures. Measures such as affirmative action policies and targeted outreach programs can help diversify SGBs and ensure that they reflect the demographic composition of their communities (Stier et al., 2018). By promoting diversity and inclusivity in governance, educational institutions can foster a sense of belonging and ownership among all school community members, thereby strengthening the foundation for effective school management and governance.

Conclusion

The research underscores the intricate impact of political influence on school management in South Africa, as revealed through the perspectives of diverse stakeholders. The results demonstrate a complex interplay of power dynamics, conflicting interests, and challenges to effective governance within educational institutions. While political influence can lead to positive and negative outcomes, its pervasive presence highlights the necessity for proactive measures to foster transparency, inclusivity, and accountability in school governance structures. By depoliticizing decision-making processes, cultivating collaborative relationships, and investing in professional development, educational institutions can better navigate political pressures and uphold their fundamental goal of delivering quality education to all students. Moreover, addressing structural inequalities and promoting fair representation within governance bodies is crucial to ensure that schools truly reflect their communities' diverse needs and aspirations. Ultimately,

by incorporating the insights gleaned from this study, stakeholders can collaborate to establish robust and adaptable educational systems that prioritize the well-being and success of every student.

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