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The challenges of principals' dual roles in South African public schools: balancing policy implementation and stakeholder dynamics

ABSTRACT

Principals play a central role in the implementation of educational policies, functioning as intermediaries between the Department of Basic Education and school governing bodies. In their dual capacities as representatives of the head of department and ex-officio members of governing bodies, principals significantly influence the operationalisation of both national and local policies within schools. These responsibilities shape their interactions with both the employer and the governing body. This study explores the challenges that principals encounter in fulfilling their dual roles in policy implementation, particularly as they navigate and attempt to reconcile often conflicting expectations. Employing a qualitative research methodology and an exploratory case study design, data were systematically collected and analysed through coding techniques. The findings reveal the complex landscape principals navigate, characterised by tensions between directives from the Department of Basic Education and the advocacy of school governing bodies, which reflect parental interests. The study further underscores the importance of integrating democratic principles and Christian values into the implementation of educational policies, advocating for inclusive participation, shared decision-making, and mutual respect – principles deemed essential for fostering just and effective governance within schools.

Keywords: Autonomy, cooperative governance, dysfunctional school, functional schools professional management

ABSTRAK

Skoolhoofde vervul 'n sentrale funksie in die implementering van onderwysbeleide deur as intermediêre gesagsfigure tussen die Departement van Basiese Onderwys en skoolbeheerliggame op te tree. In hul dubbele rolle as verteenwoordigers van die hoof van die provinsiale departement van onderwys, sowel as ex officio-lede van skoolbeheerliggame, speel skoolhoofde 'n bepalende rol in die implementering en operasionalisering van beide nasionale en plaaslike onderwysbeleide binne skole. Hierdie verantwoordelikhede beïnvloed skoolhoofde se interaksies met sowel die werkgewer as die skoolbeheerliggame. Hierdie studie ondersoek die uitdagings waarmee skoolhoofde gekonfronteer word in die uitvoering van hul dubbele rolle in die implementering van onderwysbeleide, veral in konteks van die behoefte om dikwels teenstrydige verwagtinge te balanseer en te versoen. Deur gebruik te maak van 'n kwalitatiewe navorsingsbenadering en 'n eksploratiewe gevallestudie-ontwerp, is data op sistematiese wyse ingesamel en ontleed met behulp van koderingstegnieke. Die bevindings beklemtoon die kompleksiteit van spanningsge vulde verhoudings waarin skoolhoofde hulle bevind, aangesien hulle nie slegs verantwoordelik is vir die implementering van opdragte vanaf die Departement van Basiese Onderwys nie, maar ook vir die bevordering van die belange van skoolbeheerliggame. Die studie onderstreep verder die noodsaaklikheid van die integrasie van demokratiese beginsels en Christelike waardes in die implementeringsproses van onderwysbeleide. Daar word gepleit vir inklusiewe deelname, kollektiewe besluitneming en wedersydse respek—kernbeginsels wat as fundamenteel beskou word vir die bevordering van regverdigheid en doeltreffende onderwysbestuur binne skole.

Sleutelwoorde: Outonomie, samewerkende bestuur, disfunksionele skole, funksionele skole, professionele bestuur

1. INTRODUCTION

The onset of a new democratic epoch in South Africa introduced an educational framework founded on the principles of democracy, social cohesion, equality, and justice (Clase, Kok, and Van der Merwe, 2007:244). However, despite the integration of democratic principles, the development and implementation of educational policies have posed considerable challenges, particularly for school principals, even within the context of a democratic schooling system (Clase *et al.*, 2007:244). Principals often find themselves at the intersection of conflicting interests among key stakeholders, including the Department of Basic Education (DBE), school governing bodies (SGBs), governing-body federations, and political factions, which further complicates policy processes (Clase *et al.*, 2007:244). In this dynamic context, principals are required to balance dual responsibilities: ensuring the implementation of provincial policies while simultaneously safeguarding the interests of the SGB and the broader school community (Beckmann, 2002:11; Beckmann & Prinsloo, 2009).

Consequently, effective collaboration among stakeholders becomes imperative, necessitating a clear definition of roles and mutual respect to minimise potential conflict (Van der Merwe, 2013:242). Despite the emphasis on collaboration, it is evident that policymakers often overlook critical contextual factors influencing policy implementation. This oversight frequently results in disputes over funding, staff appointments, admissions, and language policies (Clase *et al.*, 2007:244).

The primary research question guiding this study was articulated as follows: *How does the principal's dual role as a departmental representative and a member of the School Governing Body impact their capacity to implement policy effectively?* To address this question, a literature review was conducted in conjunction with semi-structured interviews. The findings of the study are presented and analysed according to thematic categories.

2. Literature review

2.1 Policy implementation: the principal and the SGB

The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 designates the governance of public schools to SGBs as stipulated in Section 16(1), thereby assigning specific duties and responsibilities to these bodies. One of the primary responsibilities of SGBs is the formulation of policies, which is integral to their role in school governance. In fulfilling this mandate, SGBs are required to develop and implement policies that are contextually relevant and address critical aspects such as admissions (Section 5(5)), language (Section 6(2)), religion (Section 7), and the school code of conduct (Section 8(1)). However, the process of developing and implementing these policies has become a significant point of contention among school principals, the Department of Education, and SGBs (Motala & Chisholm, 1996; Heystek, 2017).

The challenge lies in the assumption inherent in the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 that SGBs possess the necessary competencies to execute their responsibilities effectively; however, this assumption often does not align with practical realities (Sayed, Soudien & Carrim, 2003:38; Mestry & Hlongwane, 2009). Research highlights significant challenges faced by many SGBs, including inadequate legal knowledge, difficulties in comprehending complex terminology, and limited administrative capacity (Mabasa & Themane, 2002:112; Probyn, Murray, Botha, Botya & Westphal, 2000; Xaba, 2011). In this regard, principals are obligated as the representative of the head of department (HOD) to support SGBs in fulfilling their functions (Section 16A(1)(a) – (3) of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996). Nonetheless, this role often involves navigating tensions that arise when SGB policies are misaligned with legal frameworks, professional standards, or departmental directives. These tensions are further amplified by misconceptions regarding the principal's governance role,

with some SGBs erroneously perceiving the principal as subordinate, partly due to their involvement in the principal's appointment process (Heystek, 2004:308). Additionally, the statutory requirement for a majority of parental representation within SGBs can foster a belief in their overarching authority over school governance, exacerbating conflicts in the relationship between principals and SGBs (Heystek, 2004:308; Kruger, Beckmann & Du Plessis, 2022).

This captures the central conflict encountered by principals, who, in their dual role as representatives of the SGB, must navigate the complex balance between legal obligations and professional discretion, while simultaneously adhering to and executing the directives of their employer. Principals fulfil this responsibility by challenging SGB policies that conflict with legal requirements or threaten the school's interests, as well as opposing employer policies, for similar reasons. Conversely, certain SGBs and provincial education departments exert pressure on principals to enforce such policies, often resorting to intimidation, coercion, and threats that undermine their professional judgment and contravene directives issued by the provincial Department of Education.

The actions of SGBs in this context contradict the democratic and Christian values in the South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996, which emphasises equality, dignity, respect, and the rule of law. Christian teachings, advocating understanding and respect, align with these democratic principles. The South African Schools Act 84 of 1996 grants SGBs autonomy in policy-making, but their policies must align with democratic governance and respect the rights of all stakeholders. Policies that marginalise school principals or the provincial Department of Education violate these principles. Coercing or pressuring principals to act unlawfully conflicts with Christian values of respect and fairness.

The following cases exemplify this dual role when the complex relationship characterising the interaction between principals and SGBs is analysed.

2.1.1 Milnerton High School and others v the Minister of Education and Kamil Yunus N.O. [2020] HCSA 16385 CT

SGBs wield the authority to formulate and execute admission policies for educational institutions. These admission policies must adhere to the established benchmarks delineated in the constitutional framework. The Constitution explicitly mandates the prohibition of unjust differentiations on the grounds of "race, gender, sex, pregnancy, marital status, ethnic or social origin, colour, sexual orientation, age, disability, religious conscience, belief, culture, language, or birth". Additionally, an SGB's admission policy must conform to the parameters of the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, governmental statutes, and pertinent provincial regulations (Mansfield-Barry & Stwayi, 2017:3). In the legal context of the *Milnerton High School and others v the Minister of Education and Kamil Yunus* case of 2020, it was judicially determined that the admission criteria employed by the SGB, which favoured academic and athletic accomplishments over geographic proximity to the school, bore discriminatory implications. This stemmed from the admission policy's allowance for the enrolment of students residing beyond the immediate community while simultaneously rejecting applicants residing in close proximity to the institution.

Engaging in a hypothetical discourse, one may contemplate the profound ethical quandary confronting the school principal in this scenario. In their dual capacity as the representative of the HOD within the SGB, the DBE anticipates principled opposition from principals against admission policies contravening constitutional and regulatory mandates. Paradoxically, the SGB, vested with its distinct authority, solicits the unequivocal backing of the principal as an *ex officio* member of the SGB for the endorsement and execution of its admission policy. The predicament facing the principal is inherently intricate, as any alignment with either perspective entails inevitable adverse ramifications. Principals demonstrating dissent or nonalignment with SGB policies frequently encounter the disapproval and reproach of their respective SGBs due to their apparent reluctance.

2.2 Policy implementation: the principal and the DBE

The role of public-school principals is multifaceted, encompassing not only engagement with SGBs on matters of governance but also adherence to the requirements of the DBE. Failure to comply or divergent views on DBE policies or instructions may result in the DBE initiating disciplinary proceedings against the principal through the HOD and other provincial officials (Beckmann, 2002; Kruger, Beckmann & Du Plessis, 2021).

In terms of Section 18 of the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998, the employer (provincial Department of Education) may utilise the subsequent descriptions of misconduct to construct an accusation of misconduct against a principal, which pertains to a disruption in the employment association:

- failure to comply with or contravention of this Act or any other statute, regulation or legal obligation relating to education and the employment relationship;
- wilful or negligent mismanagement of the finances of the State, a school, a further education and training institution or an adult learning centre; or
- failure to carry out a lawful order or routine instruction without just or reasonable cause.

The ensuing case serves to illustrate the intricate dual role relationship that exists between a principal and education authorities.

2.2.1 *Gerrit Maritz Secondary School v Gauteng Department of Education (2004)*

The case of *Gerrit Maritz Secondary School v Gauteng Department of Education (2004)* exemplifies the complex policy challenges faced by school principals. *Gerrit Maritz Secondary School*, a technically oriented institution, became a focal point for the interpretation of regulations governing public-school enrolments, as outlined in Notice 4138 (Gauteng Department of Education, 2001). These regulations specify that the HOD, in consultation with the SGB, may establish feeder zones to manage enrolments and accommodate parental preferences, though these zones are not required to be geographically proximate to schools. Schools offering specialised programs, such as technical or art-focused institutions, must have larger feeder zones to include students with specific skills or interests (Gauteng Department of Education, 2001).

Designated as a specialised technical school, *Gerrit Maritz Secondary* was tasked with accommodating students from a broad geographic area. However, on 24 June 2004, the Gauteng Department of Education issued Circular 38 of 2004, Administration of student admissions in public conventional educational institutions. The circular introduced new guidelines for 2005 admissions, requiring schools to prioritise students living closest to their parents' residence or workplace, while considering language preferences and procedural compliance.

Despite complying with the directive, the principal and governing body, and district officials sought to secure an expanded catchment area for the school, but these negotiations proved unsuccessful. Consequently, the SGB, supported by parents, initiated legal proceedings against the Gauteng Department of Education, arguing that governing bodies had been excluded from consultations on the creation of new feeder zones.

The principal, as the primary respondent, submitted an affidavit supporting the SGB and parents. The case was resolved extrajudicially, allowing the school to retain its traditional catchment area. Nonetheless, the principal faced allegations under section 18(1) of the Employment of Educators Act 76 of 1998 for non-compliance to the directives of the Gauteng Department of Education. Efforts to demonstrate the charges' lack of merit eventually led to their withdrawal by the Department.

Prinsloo (2016:7) highlights the Gerrit Maritz case as a vivid illustration of a principal caught between district directives, the school's best interests, and the expectations of the school community, represented by the SGB.

3. Faith, justice, and democracy: integrating Christian values in education policy

The implementation of educational policies in South Africa must be sensitive to democratic principles, recognising the importance of inclusive participation and shared decision-making. When policies are unilaterally enforced, without meaningful input from the affected communities, they can lead to significant tensions and disruptions (Seeko & Mathebula, 2023). This is particularly evident in the challenges faced by school principals, who often find themselves balancing the interests of the DBE, the SGB, and the broader school community (Seeko & Mathebula, 2023).

The South African Constitution Act 108 of 1996 enshrines democratic participation and consultation as fundamental rights, as reflected in several key sections. Section 59 mandates that Parliament must facilitate public involvement in its legislative processes, ensuring that citizens have the opportunity to participate in decision-making. Similarly, Section 72 requires the National Council of Provinces to ensure public involvement in its legislative processes, further emphasising the importance of citizen engagement in governance. Section 195 outlines the core values governing public administration, including transparency, accountability, and responsiveness to public needs, thus reinforcing the principles of democratic governance. These constitutional provisions are complemented by the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996, which grants significant governance roles to school communities, including SGBs, thereby promoting participatory decision-making in education (RSA, 1996a).

However, unilateral decision-making by one party, whether the DBE or SGBs, disregards the democratic values of inclusivity and shared governance, potentially leading to legal conflicts and a breakdown in relationships, as seen in *Gerrit Maritz Secondary School v Gauteng Department of Education* (2004).

From a Christian perspective, democratic governance aligns closely with biblical principles of justice, equity, and mutual respect. A Christian perspective underscores the importance of listening to all voices within a community (Proverbs 18:13), and this ethos is echoed in South Africa's democratic framework (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011). A democracy that values justice, as outlined in the Constitution, mirrors Christian teachings that advocate for fairness and the well-being of all individuals, especially the marginalised (Micah 6:8) (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011).

4. Research methodology

In this study, a multiple case study design was employed as the qualitative research approach. According to Creswell and Poth (2016:96), a case study involves the investigation of a phenomenon within a specific, bounded system (i.e., a case) through detailed and in-depth data collection methods, including reports, documents, and interviews. This design enabled the researchers to gather information from a bounded context, specifically from 24 public schools across four school districts in Gauteng. The selected schools represented a mix of high, middle, and low-income areas. The rationale is that higher socio-economic classes may have greater access to education, media, and technology, enabling them to express themselves more freely (American Psychological Association, 2021). Affluent individuals often have better legal representation and resources to defend their opinions, whereas those from lower socio-economic backgrounds may face barriers due to lack of

resources or knowledge of legal rights. Socio-economic status can affect cultural capital, influencing what opinions are considered valid or acceptable in different social circles (Behavioral Scientist, 2021). Those from privileged backgrounds may feel more empowered to express themselves without fear of social repercussions (Behavioral Scientist, 2021). Individuals from lower socio-economic classes may be economically dependent on others, such as employers or government assistance programs, which could limit their ability to express dissenting opinions for fear of repercussions (Behavioral Scientist, 2021; American Psychological Association, 2021). Twenty-four principals were purposively selected for the sample, a method commonly used in qualitative research to identify and select cases that are rich in relevant information (Patton, 2002). The principals represented a diverse range of races and ages, based on the premise that individuals from different cultural backgrounds may experience the same phenomenon in distinct ways. The premise suggests that age and experience influence people's perspectives (Weltzien, Duncan & Tollerud, 2014; Kornadt, Voss & Rothermund, 2017). These participants were engaged through semi-structured interviews, where the researchers utilised open-ended inquiries, as described by Hancock, Windridge and Ockleford (2007:16), to delve into specific participants' experiences more comprehensively. The data was analysed through a coding procedure that started with the identification of relevant segments and the creation of meaningful words or phrases that were then classified (McMillan & Schumacher, 2014).

5. Presentation and discussion of the data

From the analysis of the data, the following themes appeared:

- Theme 1: Perceived coercion and compliance in the principal–department policy dynamics
- Theme 2: Perceived coercion and compliance in the principal–SGB dynamics
- Theme 3: Principals' power to influence and implement policy

Each theme is discussed below.

5.1 Theme 1: Perceived coercion and compliance in principal–department policy dynamics

The data indicates that the DBE appears to adopt a coercive approach, employing intimidation as a strategy to enforce compliance with its directives and policies. Participant 2 stated, *“Our district director on more than a few occasions instructed us to start with English classes in each grade at our schools or face the consequences of refusing to do so. In essence, the director is forcing us to ignore our schools' language policy.”* Participant 6 echoed this sentiment, noting, *“If you act in contravention of policy, you will be charged with insubordination because the Department will argue that you are not acting in the best interest of the school.”* Similarly, Participant 14 emphasised, *“at the end of the day, the Department can make it exceedingly difficult for you. I say this with hesitation, but there is a great obsession with power. The Department also has this attitude of ‘I will show you who the boss is.’ You do not want to be in such a situation; you do not want to be in conflict with your employer. I learned to become compliant with their policy even though I do not always agree.”*

Participant 15 shared their apprehension, stating, *“I developed a fear or apprehension. I say so because you must make decisions all the time, and if things go wrong, you can get fired as a boss or even lose your job. I still remember so well our previous director; he just told you straight away that you will lose your job if something goes wrong at school. However, I can no longer remember the exact threatening words.”* This sentiment was echoed by Participant 18, who remarked, *“If you do not play by the rules, you are exposing yourself, and you will lose your job. I have dependents, and it is not worth taking that risk. I will rather find another way to deal with policies and department decisions I do not agree with.”* Participant 19 reflected on the erosion of decision-making autonomy: *“after 1996, principals had much more autonomy, but*

it seems to me that in the last few years, this autonomy to make decisions at school level is getting less. More decisions and policies are forced on you as a principal. The provincial department just shows up here and forces things on you ... a typical one-size-fits-all approach. You can't develop policy and expect it to be implementable in all schools. Schools differ from each other." Participant 20 reiterated this, noting, *"the Institutional Development and Support Officer (IDSO) [walks] in and says: 'Sir, you will do this,' and I must comply."*

Other participants identified broader concerns about political motives. Participant 21 asserted, *"things like the Gauteng School Admission Policy are forced on principals, and that is going to make it difficult to protect the heritage of the school. Politics is going to kill education in South Africa."* Participant 8 highlighted the challenges of navigating conflicting roles, stating, *"you get a lot of conflict between where you are sitting in the seat of the SGB and on the other seat where you represent the HOD, in other words, the employer. So, in certain ways, you will bend some policies, but you will not ignore them and act outside your jurisdiction. The Department will take disciplinary action against you."*

While some participants expressed dissatisfaction, others reported positive relationships with DBE officials. Participant 2 stated, *"I have a good relationship with the Department at the district level because I do not question their instructions."* Participant 3 remarked, *"it is purely because I follow the rules and stick to policy. I never deviate from policy, and when I am not sure, I contact my IDSO."* Participant 7 added, *"I have an exceptionally good relationship with the officials in my district. The department leaves me alone because I follow the 'white and black' of their instructions."* Participant 23 similarly noted, *"my interactions with the department are always positive because I do what they expect of me."*

The responses of the participants suggest that the DBE's reliance on disciplinary action – articulated through phrases like *"disciplinary action"* (Participant 8), *"facing the consequences"* (Participant 2), *"charged for insubordination"* (Participant 6), *"getting fired"* (Participant 15), and *"decisions are forced on you"* (Participant 19) – illustrates the precarious position principals face when navigating departmental directives. Moreover, strongly worded expressions, such as *"making it exceedingly difficult"* (Participant 14), *"hesitation"* (Participant 14), *"apprehension"* (Participant 15), *"threatening words"* (Participant 15), *"great obsession with power"* (Participant 14), *"this attitude of 'I will show you who the boss is'"* (Participant 14), and *"you will lose your job"* (Participant 18), reveal how intimidation can foster fear and compliance among principals.

Although some participants reported harmonious relationships with the DBE, their remarks – *"I do not question their instructions"* (Participant 2), *"I follow the rules and stick to policy"* (Participant 3), and *"the department leaves me alone because I follow the 'white and black' of their instructions"* (Participant 7) – highlight a lack of genuine collaboration. A healthy relationship should allow for open dialogue and disagreement without fear of retribution.

These findings have significant implications for policy development and implementation in schools. If the DBE continues to employ coercive tactics, it risks undermining the autonomy and morale of principals, which may impede effective policy execution. Moreover, such actions run counter to the democratic Christian principles enshrined in the Constitution, which emphasise respect for human dignity, freedom of choice, and the importance of collaborative governance. Policymakers should consider fostering a more collaborative and supportive approach that encourages principals to engage critically and constructively with departmental policies, ultimately leading to more sustainable and context-sensitive policy outcomes.

5.2 Theme 2: Perceived coercion and compliance in the principal–SGB dynamics

The responses of the participants indicate that, similar to certain departmental officials, some SGBs tend to adopt coercive approaches when addressing disagreements with principals regarding policy implementation. This tendency is reflected in the participants'

accounts, which reveal instances of intimidation and threats. For example: *"the SGB chairperson talked to him in a harsh tone to either comply or face the consequences of his refusal to follow instructions"* (Participant 4); *"if you don't implement our policy, we will curtail your duties and proceed without you"* (Participant 8); and *"do as we tell [you] or else"* (Participant 22). These findings point to a pattern of authoritarian behaviour by certain SGBs, which undermines the principles of collaborative governance in schools. This observation aligns with the research of Clase *et al.* (2007), which highlights that principals often navigate conflicting interests among SGBs.

The participants' responses further reveal a lack of collaborative working relationships between some principals and SGBs. This is underscored by strongly worded remarks such as: *"they act irrationally and don't listen to any advice regarding policy"* (Participant 10); *"the SGB is a structure that I dislike. It is a structure that's more of a hindrance than a help. It is an unenviable task to develop policy or to take on projects with them"* (Participant 12); and *"policy development is a tedious exercise in the sense that if I disagree, the chairperson rudely interrupts, stating that the SGB is the governor of the school"* (Participant 19). These findings corroborate Heystek's (2004) assertion that tensions arise in the absence of collaboration, creating significant challenges for policy development and implementation.

Additionally, the responses highlight that some SGBs demonstrate a blurred understanding of the distinction between professional management and school governance. This lack of clarity has substantial implications for policy development and implementation, as professional matters do not fall within the SGB's purview. Evidence for this is seen in statements such as: *"my SGB chairman tends to be too involved sometimes and actually makes a nuisance of himself. The SGB must know it should be hands-off regarding professional school matters"* (Participant 9); and *"the SGB indicated that they want to do classroom visits; they do not understand that it is a professional matter"* (Participant 23). These deductions align with Heystek's (2004) findings, which suggest that tensions are further exacerbated by misconceptions regarding governance some SGBs have.

The data strongly indicate that the responses of participants provide critical insights into the dynamics of governance and the role of SGBs in policy development and implementation. The authoritarian tendencies, lack of collaboration, and misconceptions identified in these responses underscore the need for targeted interventions to enhance the governance capacity of SGBs and clarify the boundaries of their roles. Such interventions could significantly contribute to the effective development and implementation of policies in schools.

5.3 Theme 3: Principals' power to influence and implement policy

The following conundrum emerged from the data: if a departmental policy is more of a hindrance than a benefit to school management and governance, should the participants comply with such a policy or contravene it in order to act in the best interest of their school? Consequently, will the principal act beyond the management and governance boundaries allocated to him/her?

Participants 2, 10, 12, 17, 19 and 24 alluded to the fact that policies must take into consideration that school contexts differ and that schools cannot all be put under the same blanket. Participant 2 pointed out that *"some policies are intended to assist schools that have school management and governance challenges. Our school operates on functional management and governance principles. If I were to follow such a policy's instructions it would be an absolute waste of my time. So, I will circumvent such a policy."*

Participant 17 proposed that *"the department must differentiate between schools. In other words, policy development must cater for the different types of schools. You can't develop a policy and expect all schools to just go implement such a policy."*

According to Participant 19 *"the department must leave functional schools alone. We can develop our own policy and give feedback to the department. Rather assist where there is a need."*

Participant 20 stated that: *"Due to the uniqueness of your school and the department sending a 'one-size-fits-all' document, you as principal simply cannot implement the policy"*.

Participant 3 remarked that *"... the schools to which you would send your own children contravene policy every day"*.

Participant 7 explained: *"I am most of the times civil – obedient, but if I see that policy is actually going to burden the school with unnecessary administration, I will deviate and bend policy"*.

The findings elucidate the existence of principals who engage in behaviours that run counter to established departmental protocols. In instances where the envisaged outcome for the institution is not anticipated to be advantageous through the operationalisation of a given policy, and where said policy is poised to impose constrictions upon the institutional milieu, these principals tend to exhibit a propensity to eschew the adoption of such policies or, alternatively, to employ stratagems to navigate around them. Concurrently, pronounced viewpoints posit that the DBE ought to delineate a clear dichotomy between efficacious and maladaptive educational institutions, thereby endowing the former with greater latitude to independently formulate and execute institutional policy.

Participants 1, 2, 6, 10, 13, 14 and 21 had a more subordinate approach. These participants mentioned that they would take a consultative approach. They explained that they would communicate substantive reasons to their superiors why a particular policy would not be in the best interest of the school should it be implemented. These participants also underlined the importance of providing alternative approaches to their superiors. The participants believed that if there were disagreements over policy, it would be best to propose something as an alternative and it needed to be well communicated and substantiated as to why you wanted to act in contravention of the policy.

Participant 1 stated that *"it is important to give well-informed reasons why you do not agree with a specific policy"*.

Participant 6 emphasised that *"when I disagree with a certain policy, I always come prepared with an alternative option"*.

Participant 10 pointed out that *"when parties can't come to an agreement about certain aspects of policy development it is important to give each party an opportunity to express their views"*.

Finally, certain participants articulated their unwavering commitment to adhere to the policies promulgated by the Department for implementation within their educational institutions. This cohort of respondents underscored that any deviation from the stipulated directives of the Department would potentially result in the imposition of punitive measures, encompassing the diminution of responsibilities and obligations, as well as the initiation of formal disciplinary proceedings. The empirical data additionally unveiled a pervasive sentiment of apprehension and unease among these respondents with regard to contravening Departmental mandates, thereby elucidating a prevailing impetus driving their conformity to said mandates, irrespective of their personal dissent concerning the Department's policies or methodologies.

Participant 24 said: *"You get a lot of conflict between where you are sitting in the seat of the SGB and on the other seat where you represent the HOD, in other words, the employer. So, in certain ways, you will bend some rules, but you will not ignore them and act outside your jurisdiction. The Department will take disciplinary action against you"*.

Participant 14 stressed that *“at the end of the day, the Department can make it exceedingly difficult for you. I say this with hesitation, but there is a great obsession with power. The Department also has this attitude of ‘I will show you who the boss is.’ You do not want to be in such a situation, you do not want conflict with your employer”*.

Participant 6 stated that *“If you act in contravention of policy, you will be charged with insubordination because the Department will argue that you are not acting in the best interest of the school”*.

Participant 8 pointed out that “I will rather obey and comply than put my career in jeopardy. Our district director threatened us a few times that we are (sic) replaceable”.

6. Discussion and conclusion

The findings of this study underscore the intricate relationship between school principals, the DBE, and SGBs in South African schools, particularly in policy development and implementation. Beckmann’s (2002) assertion that principals must implement provincial policies while safeguarding SGB and community interests resonates strongly with this dynamic. The case of Gerrit Maritz Secondary School v Gauteng Department of Education (2004) highlights the tensions principals face between district directives, institutional priorities, and SGB expectations.

Regarding the relationship between the principal and the DBE, participants reported experiencing perceived coercion in the DBE’s policy implementation strategies, which were frequently characterised by intimidation and threats of disciplinary action (e.g., *“you will lose your job,”* Participant 18). This compliance-driven environment undermines trust, collaboration, and principal autonomy, raising questions about the sustainability of a “one-size-fits-all” approach (Participant 20). Sensitive policy areas, such as admissions and language policy, exacerbate this coercion.

Furthermore, the participants indicated that role ambiguity between SGBs and principals further complicates policy development and implementation. Statements such as, *“the SGB must know it should be hands-off”* (Participant 9), highlight persistent misconceptions about governance and professional management. These challenges align with findings by Clase et al. (2007) and Heystek (2004), which emphasise the need to clarify roles and promote collaborative governance. Without clear boundaries between management and governance, there is a constant risk of SGBs overstepping into areas of professional policy development and implementation, or vice versa. Such intrusions could further strain relationships and undermine effective school leadership.

The dichotomy between compliance and resistance among principals also highlights the need for flexible, context-sensitive policies. Some principals comply out of fear (e.g., Participant 8), while others adapt policies, they find burdensome (e.g., Participant 7). Participants advocated for differentiated policies that grant functional schools’ greater autonomy (Participant 19).

A Christian perspective on governance and policy implementation aligns with the principles of justice, equity, and mutual respect. The importance of listening to all voices within a community, as advocated in biblical teachings (Proverbs 18:13), mirrors the democratic principles enshrined in South Africa’s Constitution (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011). A policy environment that values justice, equity, and transparency resonate with the biblical mandate for fairness and consideration for the marginalised (Micah 6:8) (Holy Bible, New International Version, 2011). Therefore, a participatory approach to policy development, emphasising open dialogue, role clarity, and supportive mechanisms over punitive enforcement, would not only address legal and governance concerns but also reflect Christian ideals of fairness and mutual respect. This collaborative framework

could enhance policy relevance, foster ownership, and promote innovation in educational governance, aligning with Van der Merwe's (2013:242) emphasis on mutual respect and defined roles to minimise conflict.

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Dr. Johan Kruger was the main author of the research and also a student under the supervision of Prof. Andre Du Plessis.

Prof. Andre Du Plessis served as the supervisor of the research and also contributed as a co-author.