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PARENTAL AND LEARNER VOICES IN SCHOOL FINANCIAL MANAGEMENT: INSIGHTS FROM A RURAL KWAZULU-NATAL CASE STUDY

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Abstract: Democratic school governance in South Africa mandates parental and learner participation in financial management through School Governing Bodies (SGBs). However, effective involvement in rural schools remains poorly understood. This study examined the nature and challenges of parent and learner participation in school financial management at a rural school in KwaZulu-Natal's Umzinyathi District. A qualitative case study was employed, using semi-structured interviews with eight SGB members at a selected secondary school. Data were analysed thematically. Key challenges include unclear roles and responsibilities, insufficient financial skills among SGB members, a lack of formal financial policy guidelines, poor communication, and the exclusion of parents and learners from meaningful decision-making, leading to frustration and disengagement. Participation is largely symbolic rather than substantive, undermining accountability and transparent governance. To enhance financial governance, targeted capacity-building programmes, the development of clear school-based financial policies, and inclusive communication strategies are urgently needed to empower all SGB stakeholders.
Keywords: *financial management; learners; parents; rural; school governance.*

INTRODUCTION

The post-apartheid education landscape in South Africa is fundamentally shaped by policies designed to democratize school governance and redress historical inequities. The South African Schools Act (SASA) No. 84 of 1996 mandates a system of school-based management, establishing School Governing Bodies (SGBs) where parents form the majority and secondary school learners are represented (Republic of South Africa, 1996b). This legislative framework, alongside the Constitution (1996a) and the Norms and Standards for school funding, aims to decentralize authority and foster participatory governance, particularly in financial management, to improve equity and educational outcomes (du Plessis & Mestry, 2019; Mestry, 2020; Sayed et al., 2020). Financial autonomy at the school level is thus positioned as a critical lever for responsive resource allocation and community empowerment.

Globally, stakeholder involvement in school financial management is recognized as a cornerstone of effective and accountable governance. International bodies like the OECD (2020) affirm that participatory financial decision-making correlates with improved management practices, while the World Bank (2019) underscores the value of financial literacy programmes for governing bodies. In the African context, however, studies from Nigeria and Ghana reveal that such participation is often hampered by a lack of financial expertise and inadequate communication structures, limiting meaningful

engagement (Adeyemi & Arikewolu, 2019; Kwofewa & Mncube, 2020).

Within South Africa, sound financial management is universally acknowledged as vital for school advancement and sustainability (Aina & du Plessis, 2023; Sebidi, 2023; Yasin & Mokhtar, 2022). The literature strongly advocates for transparent decision-making and cooperative engagement among all SGB stakeholders to fulfill this mandate (Aina & Bipath, 2020; Dlamini & Mbatha, 2023). The democratic ethos of SASA aligns with broader scholarly views that inclusive governance fosters accountability, civic consciousness, and transforms schools into microcosms of democratic society (Davids & Waghid, 2023; Jansen & Taylor, 2023; Mabovula, 2023).

Despite this policy imperative, a significant gap exists between legislative intent and practical implementation, especially in rural settings. Research consistently identifies rural schools as facing unique, exacerbated challenges, including socioeconomic barriers, infrastructural limitations, and a systemic neglect that entrenches inequalities compared to urban counterparts (Kgomo & Sebate, 2023; Naicker & Mosia, 2023). A primary barrier is the widespread lack of financial literacy and clear role understanding among SGB members, particularly parents, which leads to over-reliance on the principal and passive governance (Ngema et al., 2024; Nkosi & Langa, 2023; Sebidi, 2023).

Parental involvement is further thwarted by language barriers and a lack of targeted induction, rendering their participation symbolic rather than substantive (Mokwebo, 2021; Mokoena, 2023). Similarly, learner participation, while legally provided for, remains minimal and often tokenistic, hindered by age-related biases and a lack of structured platforms for their voice to influence financial decisions (Letsoalo & Ramoroka, 2023; Pillay, 2023). This exclusion of key stakeholders is compounded by poor communication strategies and the frequent absence of formal, school-specific financial policies, leading to confusion, inefficiency, and conflicts (Sibanda & Tshuma, 2023; Zwane & Modise, 2023).

Consequently, the envisioned participatory governance often devolves into principal-led autocracy, breeding stakeholder frustration, disengagement, and a failure to leverage community insights for innovative resource generation (Mahlangu & Khumalo, 2023; Malinga & Mokoena, 2023). Scholars propose various remedies, emphasizing that effective governance requires moving beyond representation to meaningful inclusion. Key recommendations include mandatory, ongoing capacity-building programmes, the development of clear delegation documents and financial policies, and the fostering of trust through inclusive communication and community engagement strategies (Mbhiza & Nkambule, 2023; Msimanga et al., 2023; Tomose et al., 2024).

A critical barrier to effective financial governance is the structural and systemic nature of the challenges faced by SGBs, which extend beyond individual capacity gaps. Studies indicate that even when members are willing to participate, they are often obstructed by a lack of clear accountability mechanisms and the centralization of power. Research in Soweto, for instance, found that SGB members frequently operated without anticipating consequences for poor financial decisions, creating an environment ripe for mismanagement (Mogorosi, 2022). This is compounded by the frequent dominance of the school principal in financial matters, a paradox where democratic structures are undermined by entrenched hierarchical practices, effectively creating a form of "principal autocracy" in fiscal decision-making (Mahlangu & Khumalo, 2023; Nkosi & Langa, 2023). Consequently, the SGB's mandated oversight role is often supplanted, weakening the checks and balances essential for transparency (Sebidi, 2023).

The literature further reveals a significant misalignment between national policy frameworks and their local implementation, particularly concerning accountability and transparency. While the South African Schools Act and subsequent amendments like the Basic Education Laws Amendment Act (2024) establish stringent requirements for financial reporting and procurement, their execution in rural schools remains inconsistent. Scholars argue that policies mandating quarterly reports and audits are only as effective as the capacity of local bodies to understand and implement them (Aina & du Plessis, 2023; Mandlazi & Govender, 2021). Without localized adaptation and support, these policies can become bureaucratic burdens rather than tools for empowerment, failing to address the core issues of unclear roles and poor communication that plague rural SGBs (Kgomo & Sebate, 2023; Sibanda & Tshuma, 2023).

Focusing specifically on learner participation, evidence suggests their role in financial governance is largely peripheral. Although the Representative Council of Learners (RCL) is a

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statutory component of the SGB, their involvement is often limited to non-financial or symbolic issues. Studies confirm that learners are rarely consulted on budgetary priorities that directly affect their educational experience, such as the allocation of funds for learning materials, sports equipment, or cultural activities (Moyo et al., 2023; Pillay, 2023). This exclusion persists despite research indicating that learner insights could lead to more relevant and impactful resource allocation (Moyo & Netshandama, 2023). The combination of adult-centric governance cultures and a lack of targeted training for learner representatives ensures their voice remains a tokenistic feature of school financial management (Letsoalo & Ramoroka, 2023).

In response to these pervasive challenges, a strong consensus in the literature advocates for comprehensive, context-sensitive intervention strategies. Proposals emphasize that solutions must be multifaceted, moving beyond one-off workshops. Key recommendations include the development of school-specific financial delegation documents and standard operating procedures to clarify processes and mitigate conflict (Mojapelo, 2023; Sebidi, 2023). Furthermore, scholars stress the importance of building relational trust and viewing parents as genuine partners in the educational project, which can foster more open communication and collaborative problem-solving (Mbhiza & Nkambule, 2023; Tomose et al., 2024). Effective communication itself is reframed as a necessary strategic tool for engagement, requiring proactive and accessible information sharing (Zwane & Modise, 2023).

Ultimately, the synthesis of previous findings underscores that ineffective financial governance has direct, detrimental consequences for educational quality and equity. Inefficient or opaque financial management directly constrains a school's ability to maintain infrastructure, procure essential resources, and support extracurricular programs, which are vital for holistic development (Nhlapo, 2020; Schlebusch & Mokhampanyane, 2024). In rural contexts, where resources are already scarce, these inefficiencies exacerbate existing inequalities, hindering the redressal goals of the post-apartheid funding policy (Naicker & Mosia, 2023; Ogbonnaya & Awuah, 2019). Therefore, strengthening the voice and capacity of parents and learners in financial management is not merely an administrative concern but a fundamental prerequisite for achieving social justice and improving tangible educational outcomes in underserved communities (Sayed et al., 2020; Yasin & Mokhtar, 2022).

While existing literature broadly addresses challenges in SGB functionality and stakeholder participation, there is a paucity of nuanced, qualitative research that specifically investigates the lived experiences and perceptions of *both* parents and learners regarding their roles in *financial management* within a specific rural South African context. Previous studies, such as those by Mahlangu (2023) and Ndlovu and Moyo (2023), highlight general systemic issues but do not deeply explore the interplay of voice, exclusion, and financial governance from the dual perspectives of these mandated yet marginalised stakeholders in a defined rural locale. This study, therefore, seeks to answer the central question: How do parents and learners participate in financial management at a rural school in the Umzinyathi District, and what factors influence the effectiveness of their involvement?

This study contributes novel insights by employing a focused qualitative case study design to foreground the often-silenced voices of parents and learners in a rural KwaZulu-Natal school. It moves beyond general audits of SGB challenges to provide a thick, contextualized description of the mechanisms and barriers that shape their specific involvement in fiscal governance. By grounding its analysis in participatory governance and stakeholder theories (Fung, 2015; Freeman, 1984), the research offers a theoretical lens to interpret the dynamics of inclusion and exclusion, providing a micro-level analysis that can inform macro-level policy and support interventions tailored to the realities of rural school ecosystems, as suggested by scholars like Faku and Mulaudzi (2024) and Ngema et al. (2024).

The significance of this research is both practical and scholarly. Practically, its findings are crucial for informing the design of targeted capacity-building programmes, communication strategies, and policy implementation guidelines that can enhance genuine participatory financial governance in rural schools, thereby directly addressing issues of transparency and accountability flagged by Aina and du Plessis (2023) and Sebidi (2023). Scholarly, it enriches the literature on educational governance in post-apartheid South Africa by providing empirical evidence on the implementation gap of SASA in a rural setting, contributing to ongoing debates about equity, democratic practice, and the decolonization of school management (Modise, 2023; Naidoo, 2023). Ultimately, the study underscores that

empowering parental and learner voices is not merely a procedural formality but a fundamental prerequisite for equitable, accountable, and effective school financial management.

METHOD

This section outlines the methods used to generate data for this research. A qualitative approach was utilised for this study. Literature suggests that a qualitative approach enables the exploration of human experiences and their interpretations of a specific phenomenon (de Vos et al., 2017; du Plooy-Cilliers et al., 2014). Thus, this study examined the role of parents and learners in school financial management. A case study design involving semi-structured interviews was employed to capture the meanings attributed to their experiences by parents and learners (Cohen et al., 2018). The case study design provides an in-depth description and clear focus on the role played by parents and learners in school financial management at one school in a rural setting (de Vos et al., 2017).

The study was conducted at Balala Secondary School (the case) in Umzinyathi District, KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa. Balala Secondary School is the pseudonym given to the study site. Convenience sampling was employed to select the school from which the data were gathered. According to Cohen et al. (2018), convenience sampling involves choosing the nearest available and accessible study site for the researcher. Thus, convenience sampling was deemed appropriate for this study, as the researcher resides near the school.

The participants were selected using purposive sampling. De Vos et al. (2017) refer to purposive sampling as a technique based on the researchers' judgement in determining the characteristics of the population that are important for the research. Participants were selected based on their roles as Student Government Board (SGB) members of the School. Therefore, eight participants were selected for this study. All participants are members holding different portfolios within the SGB. The anonymity of the participants was maintained by using pseudonyms. For instance, they were named Parent 1-6 and Learner 1-2. du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) suggest that anonymity is honoured when a researcher ensures that no record of the participants' original names is mentioned at any stage of the research process. Furthermore, participants were asked for their informed consent. Furthermore, participants were informed that they could withdraw from the study at any time during the research if they no longer wished to be part of it.

Data was generated using semi-structured interviews. According to de Vos et al. (2017), researchers use semi-structured interviews to gain a detailed picture of participants' beliefs about, perceptions of, or accounts of a particular phenomenon. In this regard, the researcher aimed to explore the roles of parents and learners in School financial management. Each interview lasted 30-40 minutes with each participant and was audio-recorded using a voice recorder.

The data was analysed using content analysis, and the audio-recorded data was transcribed verbatim. According to du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), content analysis explores and identifies unique themes that illustrate the phenomenon meanings. Transcripts generated from semi-structured interviews were analysed to identify critical issues related to the research question. Data extracts were carefully selected, organised, and reviewed to ensure justifiable conclusions.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

This study revealed that although parents and learners are formally represented in the School Governing Body (SGB), their participation in school financial management remains largely symbolic rather than substantive. Analysis of the interview data generated six interrelated themes: (1) unclear roles and responsibilities, (2) inadequate financial skills, (3) absence of policy guidelines, (4) lack of communication, and (5) limited involvement in financial decision-making. These themes collectively point to systemic weaknesses in participatory school governance.

Unclear roles and responsibilities

There is widespread confusion among participants regarding their specific responsibilities within the SGB, which leads to passive involvement and reliance on the principal's decisions. The lack of financial expertise among key finance committee members poses a significant challenge, resulting in ineffective financial management practices. The following excerpts provide clarification:

> You touch on a very thorny subject: my role in school funds. It is not easy. We discussed finance; I was informed that I am a member of the finance committee, but I don't recall being told about my specific role there. The co-members of this committee are the principal, chairperson of SGB, finance officer and treasurer. All these people I like, including myself, have no accounting skills, knowledge, or

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> expertise in finance, but they are the ones handling school finances. Hence, the Principal ends up doing what he thinks is correct. I am unsure of my role in this SGB (Parent 1).

Similarly, another parent shared the above sentiments.

> I cannot tell you what my duty is at school and what I need to do or not do. I think it's because since we started here, we have not been inducted as members of the SGB on how to take care of school finances. We have not received training or education on managing school finances, so we would appreciate the opportunity to do so. We only hear that teachers have attended meetings and they must receive monies, but we, as parents, have nothing. Hence, what can we say when meetings involve funds? Only the principal tells us, and we agree (Parent 2).

The findings above demonstrate the participants' disgruntlement. They are uncertain about their roles in school financial management and link their non-involvement to their lack of financial education. Another participant also mentioned a lack of training, which contributed to their non-involvement.

> Sir, I am a Representative Council for Learners (RCL) member in our school, representing my peers in the School Governing Body (SGB). However, we have not attended any workshops or received information about school finances. I would have loved to be trained to contribute during meetings, but unfortunately, such opportunities are not available to us in this school. I am not sure whether, in areas like urban areas, they are like us who do not know what to say when we attend meetings (Learner 1).

The above findings revealed that most learners in the school sector are represented but not trained to be part of the SGB, making them uncertain whether a similar thing happens in urban areas.

Absence of policy guidelines

The absence of a clear financial management policy contributes to confusion and inefficiency in handling school funds. The findings revealed that the school lacks a financial management policy.

> I think what got us into in-depth trouble is that we lack a clear policy for managing school finances effectively. I run a supermarket, and all my workers have a contract. They are aware of their work schedule, including their days off, leave policies, and procedures for handling sick leave. Here at school, we are only invited to meetings when there is an urgent matter, and there is no prior guidance. When it comes to school finances, very little is said. I do not even know how much the school has and how much it receives (Parent 3).

The findings indicated a lack of guiding principles within the school; consequently, the role of parents was found to be insufficient. The absence of a guiding policy results in members being invited to attend meetings on an intermittent basis. Another participant noted that the school does not have a financial pol

> Most of the problems, such as disagreements at the school, stem from the fact that we lack a clear financial policy to guide us. Actually, not us, even the use of funds at the school. We cannot have a situation where one day, people complain about money after cutting the grass, and the next day, teachers complain that the SGB does not pay them enough when they use their cars to attend school. Without a policy, all these queries would have been far away from us (Parent 1).

The findings above revealed that the school lacks a policy that could have been instrumental in avoiding many of the challenges it faces.

Lack of communication

The findings revealed a lack of clear communication regarding financial matters, including the availability of funds and their allocation.

> I have served as the school treasurer for two consecutive terms, yet I have not had the opportunity to review the financial books or documents upon which we rely to manage the school funds. Each time I am called to the school to sign for the teachers who need to be paid for attending workshops, I lack clarity about what I am signing. Communication in this school is unclear. I feel as though I would leave my cows in the field, unaware of the reason I was called. Even I am tired now (Parent 4).

Another participant shared similar views.

> Parents are informed about the school budget and finances, but there is no opportunity for us to contribute. The principal tells us there is nowhere we can share our views as parents. You can check all the books and see how many parents attend meetings in this school. If you find 10 parents, that will be a significant number. It is not that they dislike the school; it is their children's

> school, but they are concerned about how things are done (Parent 5).

The above findings revealed a severe lack of communication regarding matters associated with school finances, which has led to many parents not attending even the general meetings called by the school. Similarly, another participant shared that even when they are invited, they have no agenda.

> I cannot remember the day we were told there would be an SGB meeting. Every time there is a meeting, we are called from the classroom. Even in most cases, the agenda is not presented to the members. Learners have requested sports jerseys, but we do not get them. Our teams are embarrassed when we play against other schools. (Learner, 1).

The above findings showed that due to a lack of communication, learners lose their contact learning time and are unable to receive their sports equipment.

Limited involvement in financial decision-making

Participants feel excluded from meaningful financial decision-making processes and express frustration over being unable to contribute their views. Additionally, participants often feel demotivated when their input is disregarded, which in turn affects their willingness to participate in school governance.

> Even if you opine something that might help the school generate more funds, you are ignored in this school; hence, I have decided to keep quiet. Learners have a lot of money at the end of the month. I told Sir that the school needed to adopt a similar approach to those in urban areas to generate revenue, but he ignored me. A lot of that money goes to the neighbouring tuckshop instead of coming into our school. Every year, RCLs submit a list of items we need for our cultural activities, but they are not purchased for us. If we were selling them here at school, we would have had them. When we attend cultural activities, our team does not look good like urban schools (Learner, 2).

The above findings revealed that their opinions are not regarded, even if the views are intended to make the school more representative in the eyes of other schools. Likewise, another participant lamented that their voice was not being taken seriously, which has led to another member leaving the SGB.

> My child would come with a letter inviting me to the meeting. Every time there is an urgent meeting about school finances, we parents make no contribution. When we arrive at the meeting, the principal informs us of the details and explains that it is coming from the DOE. The school needs to pay for these expenses. There is no formal meeting where we deliberate about how money is used and what they are used for. In one meeting, Mr Ndumo had a heated argument with the principal when he asked why members were not involved in decisions to hire contractors or purchase items. As I speak to you, Mr Ndumo has decided not to attend any meetings because he did not receive answers (Parent, 6).

The findings revealed a lack of financial decisions without formal meetings, whereby members can contribute. Failure to make a decision has led to members leaving the Student Government Board (SGB).

To enhance clarity and provide a structured overview of the qualitative findings, the key themes that emerged from the interviews are summarized in Table 1. The table synthesizes participants' accounts by presenting each major theme alongside illustrative evidence and analytical interpretations. This approach allows for a clearer understanding of how parents' and learners' experiences collectively reveal systemic challenges in School Governing Body (SGB) financial governance, particularly in relation to role clarity, capacity, policy guidance, communication, and participatory decision-making.

Table 1. *Summary of findings and their interpretations on SGB financial governance*

Theme	Key Evidence from Participants	Interpretation
Unclear roles and responsibilities	Parents and learners reported being SGB or finance committee members without clear role descriptions or expectations.	Formal representation without role clarity leads to passive participation and excessive dependence on the principal, weakening collective accountability in school financial governance.
Inadequate financial skills	Participants acknowledged a lack of accounting knowledge, financial	Limited financial literacy constrains meaningful oversight and decision-

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	training, or induction related to school finances.	making, resulting in symbolic rather than substantive stakeholder participation.
Absence of policy guidelines	Parents indicated that the school lacks a clear financial management policy to guide expenditure and accountability.	The absence of formal financial policies creates uncertainty, inconsistency, and conflict in fund management, undermining transparency and governance stability.
Lack of communication	SGB members reported limited access to financial records, unclear agendas, and poor communication about meetings and financial matters.	Weak communication practices erode trust, discourage stakeholder engagement, and reduce meeting attendance, ultimately weakening participatory governance structures.
Limited involvement in financial decision-making	Parents and learners felt excluded from decisions related to budgeting, procurement, and income generation, leading to frustration and withdrawal.	Exclusion from decision-making processes diminishes motivation and ownership among stakeholders, contributing to disengagement and reduced effectiveness of the SGB.

The findings of this study uncover significant deficiencies in governance and financial management within the School Governing Body (SGB), primarily driven by role ambiguity, inadequate financial literacy, the absence of policy frameworks, poor communication, and exclusion from decision-making processes. These challenges are not isolated; they reflect broader systemic issues in school governance that have been reported in various contexts, particularly in under-resourced or rural educational settings. The data reveal that SGB members, including parents and learners, often lack clarity regarding their specific roles, especially in financial oversight. This aligns with the findings of Malinga and Mokoena (2023), who reported that many SGBs operate without clear responsibilities, leading to passive governance and an over-reliance on school principals. In the current study, participants openly acknowledged their limited understanding of financial matters and governance protocols, which contributes to ineffective oversight and passive participation.

Furthermore, the lack of financial skills presents a significant barrier to meaningful participation in school financial management. This observation aligns with Nkosi and Langa (2023), who found that in rural South African schools, principals often dominate financial decisions due to the financial illiteracy of School Governing Body (SGB) members. Dependence on a single individual, typically the principal, not only undermines the democratic nature of SGBs but also increases the risk of mismanagement or non-transparent financial practices. According to Msimanga et al. (2023), effective financial management in schools necessitates a foundation of financial knowledge among all finance committee members, supported by ongoing capacity-building programmes. Nevertheless, the lack of induction and training highlighted in your findings illustrates a disregard for this necessity, placing the governance structure and the quality of financial decisions at risk.

The findings also highlight a lack of formal financial policy, which results in inconsistencies and subjective decision-making. The absence of standardised guidelines has led to disputes, poor resource allocation, and arbitrary financial procedures, all of which undermine accountability. Similarly, Sibanda and Tshuma (2023) underscore the importance of institutional policies in promoting transparency and reducing conflict, arguing that financial policies act as a cornerstone for consistency and equitable decision-making in school environments.

In the absence of a documented financial policy, financial transactions in schools are frequently guided by informal practices or the preferences of individual leaders. This situation directly contradicts national education policy frameworks, such as the South African Schools Act (SASA), which mandates clear financial management and accountability procedures. Research by Mahlangu (2023) emphasises that policy documentation improves financial management and empowers SGB members to confidently challenge unjust practices and propose alternatives. Furthermore, the comparison drawn by one participant between school operations and private-sector business management highlights how non-educational institutions often outperform schools in terms of structural clarity and operational discipline. This comparison reinforces

the need for professionalisation and structural coherence within school governance bodies.

A recurring theme in the data is a communication breakdown between school leadership and SGB members. Parents and learners consistently report being uninformed about financial matters, including budget allocations, expenditures, and meeting agendas. As highlighted in a study by Tshabalala and Molefe (2023), communication is the lifeblood of participatory governance. Trust deteriorates when communication is unidirectional or ad hoc, leading to a decline in engagement. Findings show that even SGB members in key roles, such as the treasurer, lack access to financial records and are merely summoned to endorse transactions without prior knowledge or contextual understanding. This aligns with Mahlangu and Khumalo (2023), who argue that tokenistic involvement in financial matters undermines the purpose of participatory governance, reducing stakeholders to ceremonial involvement figures.

The inadequate communication strategy has also resulted in learner representatives being excluded from deliberations, despite their formal inclusion in the SGB. This indicates a failure not only in practice but also in principle. Letsoalo and Ramoroka (2023) underscored that learner voice and participation are critical components of inclusive governance, and their exclusion reflects systemic adultism that pervades many school systems. The marginalisation of SGB members in financial decisions has created a culture of frustration and disengagement, as vividly illustrated by participants who feel their suggestions are consistently ignored. One learner's entrepreneurial idea to raise school funds was dismissed without consideration, highlighting a culture of non-responsiveness. This dynamic erodes morale and reduces innovation in school funding strategies.

According to Dlamini and Mbatha (2023), stakeholder involvement in school governance improves financial oversight and fosters a sense of ownership and accountability. When suggestions are dismissed arbitrarily and decision-making remains centralised, stakeholders may withdraw their participation entirely, as observed in your study, where an SGB member ceased attending meetings due to repeated disregard of his input.

The lack of feedback mechanisms further exacerbates this disengagement. Modise (2023) noted that participatory governance must include mechanisms that enable members to voice their concerns and receive meaningful responses. The absence of such mechanisms leads to disenchantment and diminishes the perceived legitimacy of governance processes. Findings also highlight a perceived disparity between urban and rural schools, particularly regarding access to training, resources, and opportunities for meaningful engagement. Learners and parents expressed uncertainty about whether their urban counterparts face similar challenges, indicating a broader issue of perceived inequality. This perception is validated by a recent study by Naicker and Mosia (2023), who argue that rural schools often suffer from systemic neglect, limited training infrastructure, and under-resourced governance structures. Such disparities not only hinder the development of rural schools but also entrench social and educational inequalities across region.

Participants' comments on urban schools having better sports equipment, more financial opportunities, and efficient tuckshops demonstrate how financial mismanagement at the school level can affect broader aspects of learner welfare and extracurricular development. Moyo and Netshandama (2023) emphasize the significance of holistic financial planning that incorporates administrative needs and learner development activities, including sports and cultural initiatives. The findings and corresponding literature collectively emphasise the necessity for systemic reforms in SGB operations, particularly within under-resourced schools. Training programmes must be institutionalised and mandatory for all SGB members, especially those on financial committees. These programmes should not be one-off workshops but rather ongoing professional development sessions aligned with evolving educational and financial requirements (Tshabalala & Molefe, 2023).

Equally important is the development and implementation of clear, school-specific financial policies. While national policy provides a framework, each school necessitates a tailored document that outlines procedures, delineates responsibilities, and includes checks and balances for financial decisions. Regular internal and external audits can enhance transparency and establish accountability mechanisms. Enhanced communication strategies are also vital. Hence, agendas and financial reports should be distributed in advance of meetings, and decisions must be documented and shared with all relevant stakeholders. Digital platforms could be utilised to promote communication, particularly for parents who cannot attend meetings in person. Ultimately,

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schools must cultivate inclusive environments that truly value the contributions of all stakeholders, including learners. As Modise (2023) notes, participatory governance is not merely about representation but about meaningful inclusion. Schools must progress beyond performative participation towards genuinely democratic practices.

CONCLUSION

The study has highlighted critical challenges facing School Governing Bodies (SGBs), particularly the lack of role clarity, financial literacy, structured policies, effective communication, and inclusive decision-making processes. These deficiencies collectively hinder the realisation of participatory and accountable governance, especially in rural and under-resourced schools. The findings suggest that, while legislative frameworks such as the South African Schools Act envision inclusive governance, their practical implementation remains deficient. To bridge this gap, there is a pressing need for mandatory training programmes for all SGB members, the development of localised financial policies, and structured communication channels that empower all stakeholders, including learners, to contribute meaningfully. Without such interventions, SGBs will continue to operate largely ceremonially, with limited impact on educational quality and financial accountability.

This research contributes to the broader discourse on school governance by offering insights into how contextual factors, such as rurality, socio-economic status, and institutional culture, shape the effectiveness of School Governing Bodies (SGBs). However, future research should build on these findings by employing a comparative approach between urban and rural schools to achieve a comprehensive understanding of regional disparities. Longitudinal studies could also provide valuable data on whether interventions (e.g., training or policy implementation) lead to sustained improvements in financial governance and stakeholder engagement. Furthermore, exploring the perspectives of marginalised groups within SGBs, such as learners and women, may offer nuanced understandings of power dynamics and participation. Such studies are crucial for informing policy reform and the development of targeted strategies that promote democratic, transparent, and equitable school governance.

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