



Perceptions and implications of no-fee school policy: School-based management perspectives

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Abstract

The inception of no-fee schools and a school-fee exemption policy has become a contentious issue but also an exciting one for school managers in South Africa. Managers opposed to the policy have cited amongst others things, academic standards dropping, as well as parents who can afford to pay jumping on the bandwagon and refusing to pay. While the advocates for no-fee schools argue that it is not only a moral obligation for the authorities to ensure that every child is able to get basic education, it is also a basic human right. Notwithstanding these contrasting views, an overwhelming majority (62%) of the purposively sampled principals of public schools in the Free State Province expressed relief and agreement with this decision to declare poor school no-fee schools. This article, therefore, intends to explore not only the background to the policy but also the possible impact of this decision on overall school performance as perceived by the school principals.

Keywords: school fee policy, perceptions, school-based management, panacea.

Introduction

The pre-1994 education system created huge imbalances among public schools in South Africa, particularly in terms of resource distribution and allocation. Motloug (n.d.) laments that the South African education system legacy is one of gross inequality arising from apartheid. Since 1994, there have been significant

achievements in addressing historic imbalances. The South African Schools Act of 1996 established the foundation for a non-racial approach to education. The various apartheid and Bantustan education systems and establishments have been unified into a single national department that determines broad policy, with provincial units responsible for implementation and delivery. Numerous initiatives, policies, directives and legislation have led the drive to equalise expenditure in terms of race and address issues such as class size, access to teachers and learning and teaching support materials (CREATE, 2009; SASA, 1996) including school financing and curriculum policies (Chisholm, 2004:19).

Further, Lemmer (2008:137) mentions that the most important aim of transforming the apartheid education system is to create a system of education that “opened the doors of learning and culture to all” and one that would benefit the country as a whole and its people (White paper on Education and Training, 1995:22). However, a lack of funds for education undermines the delivery of quality education in South Africa (Pandor, 2005). Schools are forced to make changes to ensure that the decrease in resources does not lower overall education standards. This places a huge responsibility on the shoulders of the principal and the governing body of a school to use these monies effectively to ensure that education remains affordable (Mestry, 2006). The state is, however, committed to the realisation of socioeconomic rights as laid down in the Constitution, its stated goals being equality in educational output among learners and the realisation of the right to free, quality basic education (Wilson, 2003:2). To demonstrate their willingness in pursuit of this goal, the national education budget has consistently increased over number of years, from R 69 billion in 2005 to R 105,5 billion for the 2007/8 fiscal year, and 140.4 billion for 2008/09, 14% increase for the past three years, and 165 billion for 2010, and currently more than 189 billion for 2011/12 an increase of 9.7% from the previous allocation.

Hunter (2008:09) indicates that while many educational systems require children to pay fees to attend school, some countries have adopted fee free systems. While this may ease drop out resulting from schooling costs, indirect costs and quality issues may increase. South Africa has recently introduced a system where schools in the lowest quintile are allowed to become ‘fee-free’. By 2005, 3 million pupils at 7 000 primary and secondary schools had already or were in the process of becoming fee free (Pandor, 2005). However, this government decision generated a mixed-bag of reactions within the education fraternity. Veriava (2003) states that there is an emerging scholarly debate on whether or not charging school fees is constitutional in terms of the Bill

of Rights. Furthermore, if it is unconstitutional, would a challenge to the state policy of allowing schools to charge fees be more likely to succeed as a violation of the right to equality (section 9) or the right to basic education (section 29 (1)(a))? While constitutional scholars continue to argue vigorously for and against the abolition of school fees, the immediate consequences of not paying school fees for poor families are dire. Hunter (2008:7) mentions that a number of studies highlight the link between poverty and dropping out from school (Birdsall, Levine and Ibrahim, 2005; Boyle, Brock, Mace, & Sibbons, 2002; Brown & Park, 2002; Bruneforth, 2006; Cardoso & Verner, 2007; Gakuru cited in Ackers et al, 2001; Dachi & Garrett, 2003; Hunter & May, 2003; Porteus, Clacherty, Mdiya, Pelo, Matsai, Qwabe & Donald, 2000; Ranasinghe & Hartog, 2002; UIS & UNICEF, 2005; Vavrus, 2002. Porteus et al (2000:10), whilst describing exclusions rather than drop out per se, paint poverty as 'the most common primary and contributory reason for students to be out of school' and Hunter and May (2003:5) call poverty, a 'plausible explanation of school disruption'. This relationship or linkage is reported in the findings of the study conducted by Dachi and Garrett (2003:36) where they asked a series of questions to parents/guardians about the financial circumstances surrounding children's school enrolment in Tanzania:

Virtually all households responding said the main barrier to sending children to school was financial and their ability to pay. Hardly any cited a negative attitude towards school on the part of the children themselves, or that the school itself was unattractive (Hunter, 2008:7).

It is my contention that due to the fact that collection of school fees has for number of years proved to be a mammoth if not an impossible task for most public schools in this country, the performance of these schools will naturally be adversely affected. It is for this reason therefore, that I decided to interrogate the impact of charging or not charging school fees on the school performance as perceived by the school managers or principals. The study is prompted by these stimulating discourses of contrasting views regarding the impact of no-fee schools and school fee exemption policy, as it relates to the sound financial function of schools in the Motheo district of the Free State Province. The paper further intends to not only identify and unpack, but also to document substantive issues raised for and against 'no-fee school and school fee exemption' policy, as well as to deliberate on some implications for choosing a particular pathway.

Impact of school fees on children's education – South African realities

The following media reports sum up not only the conditions that prevail in some South African public schools as a result of charging school fees and failure or non-payment by parents, but also their impact on children's education: "principal recalls debt collectors" (Yende, 2006:10); "no-fee schools spark row" (Govender, 2006:6); "wasted chances – no school fees, no promotion" (Musetha, 2006:15); "no more fees – poorest kids won't pay for schooling" (Daily Sun, 24 November 2006); and "school subsidies welcome" (Quail, 2006:43). In her budget speech, the then Minister of Education, Naledi Pandor (2005) commented that "the door of learning often closes in the face of learners because parents cannot pay school fees or the associated costs of schooling". Furthermore, she remarked that "poor parents' property is seized; school governing bodies refuse to assist parents who are entitled to a fee exemption" (Mohlala, 2006). It is further reported that her consideration of subsidy increases for richer schools in 2007 was welcomed; however, schools in the poorest quintiles (40%) will be fee-free and receive bigger subsidies. Nevertheless, in schools in the richer areas, fewer and fewer parents are able to pay school fees (Quail, 2006:43).

School fees and associated costs of schooling

It is assumed that part of the general public expectations from the post-apartheid era was access to education especially for the previously disenfranchised groups, and no efforts were to be spared in eradicating all possible impediments towards the accomplishment of this goal. Amongst numerous factors research has identified in whether children enrol in and attend school, direct and indirect schooling costs featured prominently (for example, Dachi & Garret, 2003:16; Fentiman, Hall & Bundy, 1999; Rose & Al Samarrai, 2001). Hunter (2008:09) maintains that while research on this often relates to access per se, there is also some research which indicates that the costs of schooling, including fees, is a central reason for dropping out (Brock & Cammish, 1997:27; Brown & Park, 2002; Colclough, Rose & Tembon, 2000; Hunter & May, 2003; Liu, 2004; May et al, 1998 cited in Hunter & May, 2003; Mukudi, 2004; Rose & Al Samarrai, 2001).

Not only do school fees lead to under-enrolment and drop out, they also limit attendance at school (Mukudi, 2004) and lead to temporary withdrawals. Research indicates children may be locked out of schools if they cannot pay schooling fees (Obasi, 2000; Ackers et al, 2001 cited in Mukudi, 2004). In Boyle

et al's (2002) research in some areas of Uganda and Zambia, the inability to pay school fees meant children withdrawing from school for periods of time, however temporarily.

The study conducted by Wilson and Veriava (2003) found that those households in which children regularly attend school bear a significant financial burden in the context of already dire poverty. The median income in Sol Plaatjie township is R640 per month. Between one third and a half of households in the settlement live in poverty, on an absolute measure of R490 per month. Around 20% live in what might be called 'ultra-poverty' using an absolute measure of R245 per month (for more information on this case, consult Veriava's article on their communitylawcentre.org.za website). The unemployment rate in Sol Plaatjie is 41%. Furthermore, the Sunday Sun of 29 October 2006 reported that the Limpopo Education Department has expressed shock and dismay over the sad story of a 10-year-old learner who was forced to repeat the same grade because her parent failed to pay her school fees. Puleng (not her real name) of Matshena village in Mutale, near the border between Zimbabwe and South Africa, was promoted to grade 3 only in October 16 after her mother raised the necessary R140. This means Puleng will write her grade 3 exams with other learners this week, although she spent the whole year in grade 2. Puleng's elder sister, Dineo (not her real name) says her younger sister repeated the class because Matshena Primary School principal refused to give her, her report from the previous year. This situation occurred despite the principal's knowing that Puleng was from a needy family.

Furthermore, Sunday Sun (2006) posits that many children, including Puleng, have been subjected to the same treatment by this principal of Matshena Primary school after parents failed to pay school fees, which are now R70, including R10 for a farewell function. In response, the chairperson of the school governing body, June (not her real name) says: "Parents agreed that no learner would get a report without paying the school funds". Similarly, Mohlala (2006), states that a mother who was slow to pay school fees, ended up with a bill from lawyers that was more than her initial debt. Evidently, the fees system contributes to growing class inequalities in public education, given the continued racial inequalities in income that effectively maintain racial differences in education. While some of the more expensive schools have established bursaries for poor students, many have not (DoE, n.d).

Table 1 provides a summative illustration of the discrepancies which existed prior to the democratic dispensation between rich and poor communities in this country and how they impacted on a school's budget.

Table 1: The impact of fees on school budgets

Item	Poor community	Rich community
Non-personnel transfer from Province	R196 000	R196 000
Teacher salaries	R2 610 000	R2 610 000
(30 teachers @ R87 000/year)	R50 000	R2 500 000
School fees		
Total	R2 856 000	R5 306 000

Source: Derived from IDASA. 1999. Intergovernmental Fiscal Review – Education (Cape Town)

It is evident from Table 1 the kind of impact school fees had on the school budget. Rich communities could easily afford more necessities (such as, employ extra staff, maintenance of their sports grounds and other facilities, increased their library material, etc.) for their school to operate optimally while poor communities had to survive on a small amount collected from parents, which could hardly buy printing paper for the entire year.

Another report by Pillay (n.d.:23) states that in late 2001, township schools were said to charge between R100 and R500 a year, while suburban schools charged R300 to R1, 000 a month. In the Western Cape, annual fees of primary schools ranged from R50 at Vuyani Primary in Gugulethu to R500 at Garlandale Primary (Athlone), R3 600 at Sea Point Primary and R5 620 at Grove Primary (Claremont). High school fees ranged from R130 at Vuyiseka High (Philippi) to R1 200 at Livingstone High (Claremont); R6 800 at Camps Bay High and R9 600 at Wynberg Boys High. Primary schooling at Reddam House (Tokai), an independent school, cost R14 180 to R21 165, while secondary schooling cost R28 220 a year (DoE Survey, 2003).

According to Hunter (2008:05) nearly all public schools currently charge an amount for learners to attend. However, most schools do not collect much in the way of fees and 55% of these schools are not able to raise more than R10 000 per year in total from fees. In contrast, public schools in the wealthiest communities are able to charge as much as R10 000 per learner; many good township schools charge as much as R6 700 per year and good suburban schools as much as R15 480 per year. Roithmayr (2002) further states that historically, the practice of user fees can be traced, in part, to discriminatory practices adopted at the end of apartheid in an effort to retain white privilege in education. At the end of the 1980s, the old regime had begun to prepare the country's white public schools for the transition to a new democratic

government. As part of that process, the government asked parents to choose from three alternative models of integration and school funding. A vote for Model A schools would have made state schools completely private. Model A schools would have received a 45% subsidy, phased in over three years. Model B schools would have remained state schools, but could admit black students up to 50% of the school's maximum enrolment. Most notably, a vote for Model C schools would have created so-called 'state-aided schools'. These schools would have received 75% of their budgets via state funding and would have been responsible for supplying the remaining 25% of their operating budgets through user fees from parents and private voluntary donations. Model C schools, like Model B schools, could also admit black students capped at 50% of the enrolment.

Therefore, the biggest challenge and a moral obligation for the new democratic South African government is to embark on a process of redress, so as to get the previously disenfranchised schools on par with those schools that were previously advantaged in terms of resources. It has become a norm that efficiency and excellence are not synonymous with public schools in this country, values that constantly eludes this significant custodian of the nation's development and survival. Amongst the most cited causal factors attributable to this situation, inadequate or lack of resources featured prominently. For number of years these inadequate resources resonated mainly with non-payment by parents and/or inability of public schools to collect school fees. So, to try and make public education accessible to every child and for public schools to function maximally, it became imperative therefore, for education authorities to review funding strategies for education in this country. In an attempt to address this imperative, the South African Department of Education released its amendments to the legal framework governing fees and the funding of public schools. The purpose of the amendments was to ensure that public schools are accessible to South Africa's poorest learners (Veriava and Wilson, 2003). These learners and their parents experience many difficulties with regard to paying school fees. Despite their legal entitlement to relief in terms of the Exemption from Payment of School Fees Regulations (1998), many learners are (still) denied access to education because their parents are unable to pay school fees.

School fees and school funding – Legal framework

Significant legislative and policy reform has occurred in the post-apartheid era to fulfil the state's constitutional obligation under section 29 and the equivalent provision in the interim Constitution. The purpose of such legislative reform is best described in the preamble to the South African Schools Act 84 of 1996

(RSA, 2011; ERP, 2006) where the Norms and Standards for School Funding seeks to give effect to the funding provision for schools in terms of the School Act. The funding aims at providing redress to the most underdeveloped and poorest schools and communities by directing that: (1) 60% of available recurrent non-personnel expenditure should go to 40% of the poorest schools in each provincial education department; (2) providing guidelines for subsidies to independent schools that are paid according to the range of eligibility criteria and the range of school fees charged (RSA, 2011).

Section 39 of SASA provides that a school may charge school fees only when the majority of parents attending the annual budget meeting adopt a resolution to do so. It also provides that parents must determine the amount of fees to be charged at this meeting, along with criteria to exempt those parents who are unable to pay fees. Regulation 3(1)(a), as read with 5(3), set the parameters to which schools must adhere when determining an exemption policy: A school must fully exempt parents whose income is less than ten times the annual school fee and partially exempt those whose income is less than 30 times, but more than 10 times the annual school fees (Hall and Monson, 2006:46). Regulation 4(1)(a) obliges the school governing body to notify parents in writing of the school fee amount charged by the school and of the criteria and procedures for exemption. Regulation 5(2) obliges the school governing body to consider certain factors when considering an application for exemption including, among other things, the parents' total annual necessary expenses, their assets and liabilities, the number of dependants, their standard of living and any other information relevant to the granting or denial of exemption (Campher, Du Preez, Grobler, Loock and Shaba, 2003:53-54).

In terms of Section 40 of SASA, a school can sue parents only for non-payment of fees where it has correctly determined its fees and exemption policy and where parents have not applied for an exemption but have failed to pay the fees set by the school (Veriava, 2003). The School Fee Exemption policy states that each school, through its school governing body (SGB), must determine fees and inform parents and caregivers about the exemption policy. The Exemption of Parents from the Payment of School Fees Regulations of 1998 under section 39(4) of the Education Law Amendment Act of 2005 (RSA, 2006:15) set out a mandatory minimum means test for the granting of exemptions. During the Means to Live research period, the means test reads as follows: "If the combined annual gross income of the parents is less than ten times the annual school fees per learner, the parent qualifies for full exemption". Partial exemptions were available for those whose income was more than ten times but less than thirty times the annual fees (RSA, 2006; Hall and Monson, 2006:45).

Eligibility for full and partial school fee exemptions is therefore determined on the basis of parental income in relation to the fees. New regulations released in January 2011 have modified the formula for calculating exemptions. In particular, the new formula takes into account the number of school-going children supported by a caregiver and provides explicit guidelines for calculating the amount of partial exemptions. In terms of the new funding norms, certain categories of children are automatically exempt from paying fees. These include Child Support Grant beneficiaries and children in foster care (Hall and Monson, 2006:46). It is essential therefore, that school governing bodies understand how to apply and comply with this Act for exemption in a 'fee-charging' school, as stipulated by law, to avoid similar cases such as the one of Sorsa and Sorsa versus Simonstown School (for more information on this case, consult the article of Veriava on their communitylawcentre.org.za website).

The No-Fee School Policy: The school funding norms and standards, recent amendments and calculations

While there were many gains in terms of increasing equality, there was a clear recognition both within and outside the state that a two-tier education system was operating in South Africa; one catering for the wealthy (which remained largely white) and one catering for the poor (which remained black). In response, the 2010 National Norms and Standards declared schools in quintiles 1, 2 and 3 to be no-fee schools, compensating these schools with a higher allocation for non-personnel, non-capital expenditure. The Amended National Norms and Standards for School Funding (ANSSSF), which came into effect on 1 April 2011, amended the 2006 norms. The ANSSSF deals specifically with public funding of both public and independent (private) schools, as well as with school fee exemptions policies (Sayed and Motala, 2009; RSA, 2011:04).

State funding to public schools is provided in two forms: personnel expenditure and non-personnel expenditure (otherwise referred to as the school allocation). Personnel expenditure remained unchanged, but the ratio of personnel to non-personnel expenditure was set at 80:20 (DoE, 2006; Ngwenya, Gullapalli and Veriava, 2006:2). The school allocation is developed using five considerations: the rights of learners, the minimum basic package to ensure quality education, prices of goods and services, the national distribution of income differences and poverty, and lastly the state budget. The majority of items covered by the school allocation fall into what can be termed operational costs (stationery, maintenance and services such as electricity); also covered are learning support materials such as textbooks, office stationery, computer software, audio-visual

aids, etc. essential items directly related to teaching and learning. Previously, all schools complemented the state allocation by collecting school fees. Under the current policy amendment, paragraph 112 of NNSSF, if funds are available, a fee-charging school can now apply to its Provincial Education Department to be declared a no-fee school (RSA, 2011:04). This would entitle the school to an increased allocation from the state to offset revenues previously generated through school fees. To ease the backlog of such requests, all quintile 3 schools were declared no fee schools effective the 1 January 2010.

The list of no-fee schools is determined provincially by the Provincial Education Department, using a standard national procedure. Each school is assigned a poverty score using data from the community in which the school is located. The three poverty indicators utilised for this purpose are income, unemployment rates and the level of education of the community, which are weighted to assign a poverty score for the community and the school. The school is then assigned to one of the poverty quintiles determined nationally (see Table 2). Schools in poorer quintiles, that is 1, 2 and with the addition of quintile 3 effective 2012, are no-fee schools and so receive larger allocations, while those in better-off quintiles (the fee schools) receive smaller state allocations. However, if funds are available, the provincial education department (PED) may offer Q4 and Q5 schools no fee status at the threshold level of R880 voluntarily. In declaring these fee charging schools as no fee schools, the PED needs to ensure all these schools are informed that they will be declared no fee schools from 1 January 2012. PEDs also need to ensure that these schools have informed parents of the change (RSA, 2011).

Table 2: National table of targets for the school allocation (2012-2014)

	2012	2013*	2014*
NQ1	R 960	R 1,010	R 1,065
NQ2	R 880	R 926	R 977
NQ3	R 880	R 926	R 977
NQ4	R 480	R 505	R 533
NQ5	R 165	R 174	R 183
Overall	R 633	R 665	R 747
No-fee threshold	R 880	R 926	R 977
Small schools: National fixed amount	R 22,218	R 23,373	R 24,752

*Indicative – CPI inflation rate adjusted [2013 and 2014 figures inflation adjusted – CPI inflation – National Treasury: Budget Review]

Source: RSA (2011:04)

The amounts in Table 2 refer to the per learner allocations for each category of school: Column A lists per learner amounts (2012-2014) in each national quintile that can be funded to the no-fee threshold level. Thus in 2012 the poorest schools (NQ 1 and 2) which now includes Q3, which are no-fee schools, will receive allocations of R960, R880 and R880 per learner, for 100% of their learners. Richer schools, which are fee-charging schools, will be allocated less than the adequacy benchmark of R880; in 2012 schools in Quintile 4 will receive R480 and schools in Quintile 5 R165 per learner respectively of their learners.

Table 3: National Poverty Distribution table

	1 (poorest)	2	3	4	5 (least poor)	Total
EC	28.2	21.7	19.7	17.4	13.1	100%
FS	19.7	22.0	18.9	21.8	17.6	100%
GP	12.7	15.4	19.3	23.0	29.6	100%
KZN	20.9	22.2	21.1	20.2	15.4	100%
LIM	28.1	24.7	23.9	15.6	7.6	100%
MP	25.3	22.4	21.0	18.7	12.7	100%
NC	22.3	22.6	21.6	20.6	12.9	100%
NW	23.5	23.4	18.7	17.0	17.3	100%
WC	9.5	13.6	16.9	22.1	37.9	100%
South Africa	20%	20%	20%	20%	20%	100%

Source: RSA (2011:04)

Resource allocation also differs for different provinces and nationally determined poverty tables are used to guide the school allocation (see Table 3). For example, the Eastern Cape is identified as the poorest province, with 28.2% of its schools falling into Quintile 1 (poorest) compared to the wealthier Western Cape where only 9.5% fall into Quintile 1. Provincial Education Department targets for each province will therefore differ accordingly. Poor provinces have the majority of learners in the poorest no-fee quintiles. The Eastern Cape and Limpopo have 49.9 and 52.8 respectively of their learners in the first two quintiles, while KwaZulu-Natal has 43% of its learners in those two quintiles (Table 4). The relatively small percentage of Gauteng and Western Cape learners

in the poorest quintiles indicates that the average income in these provinces is higher than the national average (Sayed and Motala, 2009: RSA, 2011).

The fee exemption policy of 2006 under NNSFF, paragraph 170, which applied to both rich and poor schools, was viewed as a way of ensuring that no learner was denied access, by allowing their parents to apply for full or partial exemption at any school. With poor schools now being declared no fee schools, exemptions apply only to fee-charging schools (RSA, 2011). There are two major classes, orphans and abandoned children receive automatic exemption and parents of learners receiving a poverty-linked state social grant also qualify for full exemption. In the second class of exemption, parents may be granted full or partial exemption based on their income in relation to school fees, determined by a set formula which schools apply upon receiving a written application from a parent. In theory, exemptions permit even the poor to attend fee-charging schools. Exemptions have also highlighted the issue of state subsidisation of poor learners in non-poor schools and how this responsibility is being devolved to parents in these schools (RSA, 2011:06).

Table 4: List of learners exempted by the school in the previous year

LURITS Learner Number	Period for which learner was enrolled at school in school days (P)	Full time equivalent (FTE) = number of school days in the year for which learner was enrolled at the school (FTE) e.g. There are 200 school days in the year and learner B was enrolled for 150 days (150 ÷ 200 = 0.75)	Percentage of school fees from which learner was exempted (more than 0% to a maximum of 100%) (E%) e.g. Learner B received a full school fee exemption, therefore 100%	PED per learner allocation	Compensation per learner (E% x no fee threshold x FTE) minus (PED per learner allocation to the school), based on a no fee threshold of R784 in 2010 (C) e.g. Compensation in respect of learner B is: (100% x 784 x 0.75) – 100 = 388
0000001	200	1	100%	R100	R684 ²⁾
0000002	150	0.75	100%	R100	R388 ²⁾
0000003	100	0.5	50%	R100	R96 ²⁾
0000004	200	1	40%	R100	R214 ²⁾
0000005	50	0.25	10%	R100	R0 ²⁾
					R1482 ³⁾

Source: RSA, (2011:06)

2) These preliminary totals do not take into account provincial weight (W) as described below.

3) Preliminary total for the school

i. Each learner to be converted to a FTE, i.e. school days enrolled ÷ official number of school days. The school will receive for each learner:

[% Exemption x FTE x NFT x Weight (W) minus the per learner allocation for the school

where, NFT is the No Fee Threshold and W is calculated by dividing the total PED budget for compensation by the preliminary total exemption claim of all schools, therefore:

W for the PED = PED Budget for compensation ÷ \sum of Preliminary Total (all schools)

If, for example, a province has budgeted R5 million for compensation for exemption and the preliminary total of claims for compensation by all schools in the province amounts to R6 million, the provincial weight will be calculated as follows: **W = 5,000,000 ÷ 6,000,000 = 0.83**

Example: if the provincial weight is 0.83, the claim payable to the school by the PED will be R1 230 (R1 482 x 0.83).

Norms and Standards provide details on exemption procedures. Parents wishing to qualify for exemption must apply in writing or in person if desired. When submitting an application, they must provide evidence of income, assets and liabilities and other information requested by the school governing bodies. Furthermore, in terms of Education Law Amendment Act, No. 24 (RSA, 2011), governing bodies must render a decision within twenty-one days of the application and if the governing body denies a request for exemption, the parents have the right to appeal.

Methodology

Research design

This research study was conducted in 2006 and the questionnaire questions were relevant at that time, however, extensive updates based on the recent developments on the subject under investigation have subsequently been done. The research was quantitative in nature and followed a descriptive and

exploratory research approach, using a survey to collect data. A semi-structured questionnaire was sent to 185 principals on their perceptions and attitudes regarding school exemptions and a no-fee school policy. The questionnaire was divided into two sections: Section A: demographic information and Section B: factual questions about perceptions and attitudes regarding school exemptions and a no-fee school policy using a five-point Likert rating scale, *1 = strongly agree* to *5 = strongly disagree*, to measure the responses to the items. Where necessary, closed-ended questions were followed up by an open-ended questions to probe further on the responses provided. The following are typical examples of questions in the questionnaire, probing the impact of the no-fee school policy, pre- and post its inception: ‘collection of school fees does not take much time off class teaching anymore’, as well as ‘overall school performance has improved since the introduction of a no-fee school policy’.

Sampling and data collection

A two weeks pilot-study was conducted to a total number of fourteen (14) principals of township schools in the Bloemfontein area prior to the refined questionnaire ultimately distributed to the respondents. A purposeful or non-probability sampling strategy was used to select (n=185) principals of both primary and secondary schools in the greater Motheo District. A total of 128 completed questionnaires were returned (i.e. a response rate of 69%). Data collection from both urban and semi-urban public schools areas of the Free State Province was done in two stages, firstly, (n=91) questionnaires were given to student teachers undergoing their three weeks’ teaching practice in the Mangaung area (i.e. Bloemfontein, Botshabelo and Thaba-Nchu areas). Secondly, (n=94) principals of schools in other two areas namely, Naledi (n=43) and Mantsopa (n=51) were purposively identified and questionnaires faxed to them and some hand-delivered for completion. Owing to the small size of the sample population (n=185), inferences and assertions made in this article will serve only as an indication of how principals of public schools feel, without laying any claim to the generalisability of the results.

Results

The demographic profile of the respondents included gender, ethnicity, the type of school, quintile status, work experience as principal, the location of the school and age of the respondents. The demographic profile of the sample population (n=185) is shown as frequencies and percentages in Table 6.

Table 5: Demographic profile of the sample population

Demographic variables	Total sample (n=185)	% in sample
Gender		
Male	121	65
Female	64	35
Ethnicity		
Black	142	77
White	36	19
Coloured	7	4
Type of school		
Primary schools	83	45
Secondary schools	102	55
Work experience as principal		
Fewer than 5 years	15	8
Between 5 – 10 years	126	68
Between 10 – 15 years	24	13
15 years and More	20	11
Location of school		
Urban	179	97
Semi-rural	6	3
Quintiles		
Q1	33	18
Q2	72	39
Q3	35	19
Q4	6	3
Q5	39	21
Age		
Mean	Standard deviation	Standard Error
44,52 years	2.44	0.469

Table 5 above shows that the majority (65%) of respondents were males, with black Africans making up 77% of the total sampled population. The majority of the respondents (68%) have work experience as principals of between 5 and 10 years, with their mean age of 45 years. A sizeable number (97%) of the participating school are located in the urban area, and fifty five (55%) percent of them are secondary schools, and a total of 76% of these schools ranging

between quintile 1 and 3. Similarly, Mpolokeng (2011:68) in his study of the schools in the Lejweleputswa Education district of the Free State Province reported a 70% of schools resorting under Q1-Q3, It can be safely inferred from this findings that a reasonable number of schools in the Free State Province can be categorized as poor and assistance and intervention by the education authorities through declaring these schools no-fee schools will come as a huge relieve to their schools' financial situation.

Table 6: School's main source of income

School type	School fees (%)		Extra source (%)		Collection strategy working (%)	
	Yes	No	Yes	No	Yes	No
Formerly black schools	100	0	12	88	100	0
Formerly white schools	100	0	45	55	50	50
Formerly coloured schools	100	0	15	85	5	95

From Table 6 above, it is evident that almost all (i.e. formerly black, 88%; formerly coloured, 85%; and formerly white schools, 55%) schools' survival depends on the collection of school fees, with mainly affluent former white schools having an extra source of income to augment their school fees. Another difference between black township schools and affluent former white schools seem to centre on the strategies applied to collect these funds with the success rate being higher in affluent white schools than in black township schools. One principal remarked: "We apply various strategies such as a cultural day; Valentine's day; a casual day, raffles, etc. to generate extra income but support for these endeavours is invariably disappointing; so we depend primarily on school funds for survival". In addition, another principal state that "even corporate businesses are reluctant to sponsor township schools; they prefer town or suburban schools, because those kids' parents own or manage those companies. It is not easy to run a township school and yet you are expected to deliver at the end of the day."

It can be safely inferred from this finding that two things are evident, firstly, public schools struggle to collect school fees and raise funds, secondly, there is a huge disparities between private schools and public schools in terms of revenue sources, which makes the execution of the day to day operations of school activities almost impossible without sufficient funds for these public schools.

Table 7: Relationship between school fees and school performance?

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Yes	171	92.4	92.4	92.4
	No	14	7.6	7.6	100.0
	Total	185	100.00	100.0	

Table 7 above shows a strong correlation between school performance and school fees (92%). The following comments are indicative of such a relationship: “School fees help to buy basic teaching and learning aids, chemicals for the science laboratories, books for the library, repairs for broken doors and windows, etc.; all these are requirements for a normal functioning school” remarked one principal. Similarly, “A comparison is always drawn between the performance of township schools and suburban schools, yet resources are not factored in when judgement is passed on us” adds another principal. It can be deduced from these findings that public school performance will forever be a subject of debate in this country. What is central in this debates is always lack of resources, which are (allegedly) always in abundance at private schools, hence their good performance.

It is therefore not surprising when most of the complaints regarding for example; ill-equipped laboratories, lack of printing paper, heavy teaching loads, poor maintenance of facilities - such as photocopy machines, playing grounds, etc. are common at public schools, and their performance on academic results as well as extra-mural activities leaves much to be desired. This is confirmed by the remark by one public school principal that “everything of private schools is in immaculate condition, their premises, facilities, staff morale, play-grounds, and this goes to show why their learners are performing they way they do, the environment allows them to”.

Table 8: Whether the school is affected by the Minister’s school fee exemption rule

Type of school	Yes (%)	No (%)	Uncertain (%)	No. of learners affected	
				Primary	Secondary
Former black schools:	100	0	0	95	62
Former white schools:	12	86	2	35	11
Former coloured schools:	100	0	0	78	66

Black (95%) and coloured (78%) schools in Table 8 report an absolute dependency on government funding, while their former white (35%) counterparts indicate a meager percentage of them being affected by the fee exemption policy. “We are battling to make ends meet as township schools. Just to give you an example, do your research and check how many township schools have a functioning telephone” remarked one township school principal. Table 9 shows that most black (95%) and coloured (78%) learners attending primary schools benefit from this policy, because they attend either no-fee schools or have a sizeable number of learners exempted from paying school fees. It is evident that the no-fee school policy will come as a huge relief for these schools. “It is inevitable that our finances are likely to feel some strain with the influx of black and coloured students to former white schools; we will also soon be requesting some relief from government” remarked one former white school principal.

Table 9: How the no-fee policy decision affect the school’s finances

Type of school	Good (%)	Badly (%)	No impact (%)	Uncertain (%)
Black schools	96	2	0	2
Former white schools	40	38	0	22
Former coloured schools	99	0	0	1
Total / mean	78	14	0	8

Table 9 above shows that (78%) of school principals applauded the government on its decision to declare some schools no-fee schools. The following remarks clearly demonstrate this: “Apartheid has disadvantaged and compromised a black child’s education and it is time our democratic government started to seriously attend to these issues as a matter of urgency”; “Everything we did depended on the monies we had and if parents were unable to afford the school fees, it puts a huge strain on the normal functioning of a school”; “It is long overdue; principals of township schools have been subjected to unfair criticism in as far as their school’s performance is concerned, and yet, in terms of resources we have never been equal”; “Our schools’ finances have always given us a headache; it has been headache number one for principals and this decision comes as a relief for township schools. We need to congratulate the government on this bold decision (i.e. declaring some schools no-fee schools); the material conditions of our schools have been undesirable for decades and

this has put pressure on our schools to deliver without even basic teaching and learning materials; development funds have hardly assisted us.”

Conversely, some principals, no matter how small a percentage they represent, argued that this decision is likely to have a ripple effect for some schools, especially in as far as paying parents are concerned. This is confirmed by Quail (2006:43) that “the increasing number of exemptions has reduced school income and put greater pressure on a few parents who do pay escalating fees. Let’s hope that budgets are realistic and the provinces receive additional funds.” “The minister’s decision will have only a good impact on township schools if the money from the government is paid timeously throughout the year and our school programmes are not interrupted” said one principal. Charging “school fees have denied myriads of black children the opportunity to be educated. All township schools applaud government on this move; somehow this policy will level the playing fields and this will help township schools that have been struggling financially, due to the legacy of apartheid for number of years” said one black principal.

The following variables were extracted from the open-ended responses of the pilot study and included in the final questionnaire.

Table 10: Correlation between school fee exemption and selected variables

No.	Variables	No.	mean	Sig.
1.	School management is able to spend time and energy on the overall school performance	178	52.700	.008
2.	Teachers focus on teaching and learning	169	55.543	.016
3.	Improved relations between teachers, learners and parents	161	53.000	.033
4.	Provision of essential school resources, stationery, laboratories, etc.	152	68.000	.001
5.	Constant school infrastructure development, painting, replacing broken tables and chairs speedily, etc.	93	59.096	.360
6.	Expedient delivery of school necessities	77	57.743	.012
7.	Cultivation of a culture of self-control and financial prudence, i.e. better financial planning and control	53	55.980	.059
8.	Other, i.e. peace of mind, no squabbles, etc.	41	52.544	.850

Sig. level (p= .05)

The information in Table 10 above indicates that a focus on school performance ($p=.008$), teaching and learning ($p=.016$), improved relations ($p=.033$); provision of resources ($p=.001$); and expediency ($p=.012$) were significantly correlated with a fee exemption policy at .05 level of significance. Significantly, the paper further indicates a significantly negative correlation between infrastructure development (0.360); other (0.850) between the fee exemption. Schools need money to function effectively; former white schools excel because they have everything they need in terms resources and will continue to flourish because “those black schools said to be poor, are in communities where most of the parent community cannot afford to send their children to the most expensive private schools around. Why are the faces of most former white schools predominantly black these days?” asked one black principal.

Table 11: I would prefer to have my school declared a section 21 school.

		Frequency	%	Valid %	Cumulative %
Valid	Yes	169	91.4	91.4	91.4
	No	12	6.5	6.5	97.9
	Uncertain	4	2.1	2.1	100.0
	Total	185	100.0	100.0	

From Table 11 above, it is clear that almost all public schools (91%) prefer to assume the section 21 status. Mestry (2004: 230) states that one of the greatest advantages of being allocated section 21 functions is that in the event of the school being unable to spend the State’s allocation in the current financial year, the funds will still be available to the school in the following financial year. One of the greatest disadvantages of non-section 21 schools is that in the event of requisitions not being processed by financial year-end, schools lose their allocation since there is no ‘roll over’ of unspent budget amounts. A principal from a former white school comments that “the intention of the no-fee or fee exemption policy is noble; the only sad thing about it is that parents who can afford will now stop paying and exaggerate their poverty levels”. About 73% of the participants were of the opinion that all schools should automatically be allocated section 21 functions.

Recommendation and conclusion

Even though there is overwhelming support in favour the no-fee schools policy, striking a balance between opposing views might not be a simple process. It will however, be wise to heed these two warnings:

Danger of cultivating a dependency syndrome, i.e. ‘gimme, gimme’ attitude (a culture of entitlement) can be dangerous, because ultimately, most schools might not endeavour to think of constructive means of generating income, because government will provide. The report by Oosthuizen (2003:217) carries very useful lessons, when he states that school fees are the primary source of funding in education. He mentions that education institutions many employ a variety of methods to supplement their finances; for example, school functions, admission and subscription fees for sporting events and letting of the school facilities (school hall, tennis courts, swimming pool and classrooms) after hours to learners and parents. He also mentions that other possible methods of fundraising are: canvassing for trust funds (either for specific or general purpose); the sale of pledges for the construction of buildings or the creation of sport facilities and requests for donations and bequests from parents and ex-students.

It is recommended that education authorities need to inculcate an entrepreneurial attitude in schools. Acknowledgement of categories of income self-generation by schools should be matched rand for rand. Currently this practice will be practical only when certain schools require additional funding or a bail-out of whatever kind. Self-sustainability and sound and financial prudence should begin to be the norm rather than the exception for schools in this country.

Can this funding be sustainable? Does this policy/Act not also encourage the rest of the public schools in this country to later cry foul and claim to be financially helpless? Van Deventer and Kruger (2003:235) explain that the adoption of the SASA (Act No. 84 of 1996), introduced the principle and practice of partnership in education through School Governing Bodies with school-based or self-managing responsibilities, including financial management responsibilities, which gave schools greater direct responsibility for financial matters. They further explain that the SASA makes provision (by means of Article 21), for public schools to become more responsible for managing certain functions themselves (RSA, 1998:28). The South African Schools Act requires the Minister of Education to table regulations about the equitable criteria and procedures for exemption of parents who are unable to pay school fees (section 39(4)) (DoE 1998). It is also required of governing bodies to notify all parents in writing about the equitable criteria and procedures for exemption, as decided on by the parents at a general meeting at which the budget is considered. Since fee revenue is determined both by the fee level and by the number of fee payers, the national norms relating to exemption are designed to assist parent bodies to make appropriate and equitable decisions about the fee level and the exemption thresholds (DoE, Norms & Standards, 1996).

The Act comes as a reprieve for most poverty-stricken sectors of our society, as well as to eliminate constant problems for school governing bodies regarding the fruitless attempts of trying to collect school fees from parents. It is evident from these results that most principals perceive the no-fee school policy as a definite panacea for most impoverished schools. The only concern is the timeous allocation of these funds to schools by the Department of Education, as well as the modalities of implementation by the school governing bodies for reporting and accountability purposes and most importantly, encouraging the self-sustainability of schools.

However, the no-fee school policy might have the following consequences for the education regime in this country:

- An expected ongoing increase in public finance for education - a permanent burden on the country's budget and finances.
- Possible influx - as many more children can now (freely) access education
- Assuming quality education offering, movement of learners from expensive private schools to public schools.
- The increased centralisation may lead to a weaker accountability relationship between clients and service providers (Bold, Kimenyi, Mwabu and Sandefur, 2010:8-9). School management team (SMTs) and school governance board (SGBs) no longer raise funds and as a result their governance power might be undermined
- Equally, parents no longer pay for the school, so they may lose a sense of ownership.

Sig. level (p= .05)

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