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# SCHOOL BOARD MEMBERS' SELF-EFFICACY BELIEFS ABOUT THEIR GOVERNANCE TASKS: A CASE STUDY OF TWO DISTRICTS IN LESOTHO

S.L. SENEKAL & M.K. MHLLOLO  
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## Abstract

Although decentralization has led to greater autonomy for school boards [SB]; many of them seem to be ineffective. This paper examined the extent to which SB members perceived their tasks as challenges or as threats. Bandura's self-efficacy theory framed this qualitative study in which 108 participants were purposively sampled. A Skills Confidence Inventory (SCI) was used to collect data. The results from this study show that SB members have moderate to high self-efficacy beliefs in 5 of the 7 roles that were investigated. Further studies should be conducted to determine the responsive levels existing within the school governance environments.

**Keywords:** school governance, self-efficacy, Skills Confidence Inventory.

## 1. INTRODUCTION

Over the last few decades, there has been a “preoccupation with decentralisation” over such matters as the quality and standards of education, particularly among the developing nations (Zajda, 2015). The basic premise throughout society's trajectories has always been that people who have the most to gain or lose (students and their parents) and those who know what goes on in the classroom and school (teachers and school principals) should have both greater authority and greater accountability (Collins, 2004). The proponents of the active participation of parents, teachers, students and community strongly argued for the establishment of School Based Management (SBM) programmes as a vehicle to reach both inclusivity and decentralization. According to Waslander, Pater & de Weide (2010), school-based management is a formal alteration of governance structures, a form of decentralization that identifies the individual school as the primary unit of improvement, and a structure that relies on the redistribution of decision-making authority as the primary means to stimulate and sustain the expected improvement. Thus, there are various terms, which are used to name these programmes, and these include: Parents Teachers Associations (PTAs), School Committees (SMs), School Governing Boards (SGBs), School Management Committees (SMCs), School Based Management Committees (SBMCs) and School Boards (SBs). This article, in consistence with the Lesotho terminology, uses the term School Board (SB) to refer to such school-based management.

## 2. STATEMENT OF THE PROBLEM

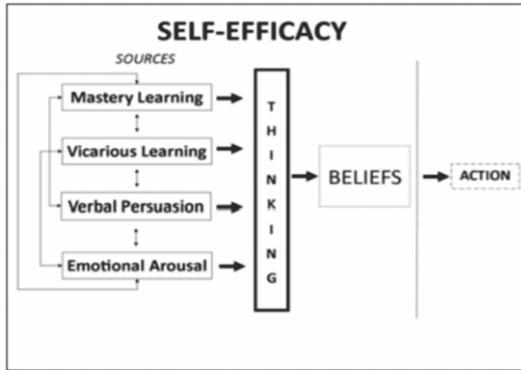
Although decentralization has led to greater autonomy for school governing boards in making decisions at school level; many SB's seem to have difficulty in fulfilling their functions (Asmal, 1999). Matalasi (2000) asserts that members of the School Board in Lesotho need regular training on the duties they are expected to perform and the powers they wield. Their difficulties range from inability to perform their functions as stipulated in the law to failing to participate meaningfully in critical meetings. This dichotomy where, on one hand SB's are perceived to be dysfunctional, while on the other hand they are still preferred, suggests a pressing need for researchers to determine how SB's can be made more functional. However, fewer studies have been conducted in Sub Saharan Africa, especially in Lesotho, thus suggesting that this area has not yet attracted a huge researcher attention (Onderi & Makori, 2012). This study sought to fill the above-noted research gap.

## 3. THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

An immediate question would be: What theory can assist in explaining some of these observations? Grant & Osanloo (2014) define a theoretical framework as the foundation from which all knowledge for a research is constructed. It serves as the structure and support for the study's problem statement, rationale, purpose, significance, and the research questions. Hence, research without a theory will not progress to definite findings as there would be no frame to hold and develop the study from.

### *Bandura's Social Cognitive Theory*

While there are several influential theories and models in the field of school governance, this study was anchored in Bandura's (1977) Self-Efficacy Theory, which was developed within the framework of the broader Social Cognitive Theory. In his 1997 book, *Self-Efficacy: The Exercise of Control*, Bandura set forth the tenets of the theory of self-efficacy and its applications to diverse fields. Perceived self-efficacy is embedded in the broader theory of human agency that specifies the sources of self-efficacy beliefs and identifies the process through which they produce their diverse effects (Bandura, 2001). Figure 1 depicts this process with each of the stages explained briefly below.



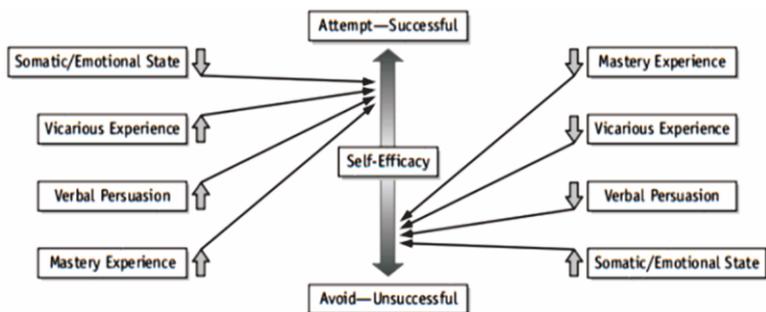
**Figure 1:** The Cognitive Process.

*Sources* - Efficacy beliefs are the product of a complex process of self-persuasion that relies on the cognitive processing of diverse sources of efficacy information (Bandura, 2001). These include performance mastery experiences or mastery learning; vicarious experiences or judging one's capabilities in comparison with the performances of others; verbal persuasion and allied types of social influences indicating that one possesses certain capabilities; and emotional arousal defined as the way a person responds to their own levels of anxiety and stress.

*Thinking* - Bandura argued that information that is relevant for judging personal capabilities is not inherently enlightening. Instead, these different sources of efficacy information must be cognitively processed, weighed, and integrated through self-thought in the self-appraisal of efficacy. In this metacognitive activity, people judge the correctness of their predictive and operative thinking against the outcomes of their actions, the effects that other people's actions produce, other people's beliefs, deductions from established knowledge, and what necessarily follows from it. A major function of thought is to enable people to predict events and to develop ways to control the events that affect their lives. Such skills require an effective cognitive processing of information that contains many ambiguities and uncertainties (Bandura, 2001).

*Beliefs* - The projection of a forethoughtful perspective over a long-time course on matters of value provides direction, coherence, and meaning to one's life. This suggests that people's thought processes enable them to form a self-schema or belief concerning their efficacy. Accordingly, Bandura (1977: 391) postulates that self-efficacy beliefs, "people's judgments of their capabilities to organize and execute courses of action required to attain designated types of performances," affect human functioning and stand at the very core of the social cognitive theory.

*Action* - Self-efficacy beliefs have a major influence on future success because they lead to action or inaction (Bandura, 1994). In other words, behavior is influenced by self-efficacy beliefs (Margolis & McCabe, 2006) hence it can be argued that people's performance attainments are strongly and intricately powered by their belief in their personal efficacy. Bandura postulates that self-efficacy expectations are crucial because they influence whether an individual will undertake the exploration of a domain of activity (approach behavior) or avoid exploring that domain (avoidance behavior). Figure 2 summarizes this relationship between self-efficacy beliefs and its influence on action.



**Figure 2:** Determinants of self-efficacy

Bandura (1997) refines this relationship and shows how both the low and high levels of efficacy interact with the responsive and unresponsive environment to produce the following four predictive variables:

- a) *Success (H, R)* - A person with a high level of self-efficacy in a responsive environment will be successful. Their positive attitude toward their abilities coupled with environmental change promotes success and improves long-term motivation.
- b) *Depression (L, R)* - A person with a low level of self-efficacy in a responsive environment may fall into a depressed state. They know the environment will change but their lack of belief in their own abilities stops them from trying and succeeding.
- c) *Apathy and helplessness (L, UR)* - A person with a low self-efficacy and in an unresponsive environment will feel helpless and decide that all efforts are pointless thus causing them to be completely inactive.
- d) *Effort intensification or change of course (H, UR)* - A person with a high self-efficacy in an unresponsive environment will either increase their efforts toward change or decide they need to change their goals.

Other researchers (see Pajares, 2003) further argued that self-efficacy beliefs are predictive of three behaviours, which are (a) choice (approach vs avoidance) (b) rate of performance and (c) persistence or expenditure of energy.

Despite these variations in the conceptualizations of predictive behaviors of self-efficacy beliefs, the core feature of agency is its power to originate actions for given purposes (Bandura, 1997). Self-efficacy beliefs provide the foundation for human motivation, well-being, and personal accomplishment. Bandura's (1997) key contentions concerning the role of self-efficacy beliefs in human functioning is that a strong sense of efficacy enhances human accomplishment and personal well-being in various ways. A strong sense of coping efficacy reduces vulnerability to stress and depression in taxing situations and strengthens resiliency to adversity. Such an efficacious outlook fosters intrinsic interest and deep engrossment in activities. People with a high self-efficacy set high goals for themselves and maintain a strong commitment toward these goals. In addition, such people heighten and sustain their efforts in the face of failure. They quickly recover their sense of efficacy after failures or setbacks. They attribute failure to insufficient effort or deficient knowledge and skills, which are acquirable. Finally, people with a high self-efficacy approach threatening situations with assurance that they can exercise control over them. Hence, a high and positive efficacious outlook produces personal accomplishments, reduces stress and lowers vulnerability to depression.

In contrast, people who doubt their capabilities shy away from difficult tasks as they view these tasks as personal threats. Such people have low aspirations and a weak commitment to the goals they choose to pursue. When people who doubt their capabilities face difficult tasks, they dwell on their personal deficiencies, the obstacles they will encounter, and all kinds of adverse outcomes rather than concentrate on how to perform successfully. Much empirical evidence supports Bandura's contention that self-efficacy beliefs touch virtually every aspect of people's lives — whether they think productively, self-debilitatingly, pessimistically or optimistically; how well they motivate themselves and persevere in the face of adversities; their vulnerability to stress and depression, and the life choices they make (Redmond, 2010).

#### **4. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY AND RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

This paper draws from a PhD study (Senekal, 2015). Although four research questions were raised in the study - one linked to each of the four sources of self-efficacy; this article examines the fourth source of self-efficacy beliefs - emotional arousal; which can be defined as how a person responds to their own levels of anxiety and stress (Bautista, 2011). Williams and Williams (2010) concluded that individuals with high levels of self-efficacy approach difficult tasks as challenges to master rather than as threats that need to be avoided. Given this observation the paper raises the question: To what extent do School Board members in Lesotho perceive their tasks as challenges to master or as threats to avoid?

## 5. METHODS

### Research Design

The researchers adopted a phenomenological approach as a method of achieving the objectives in this qualitative study. This decision followed Langdridge (2007:4) definition of phenomenology as a discipline that "aims to focus on people's perceptions of the world in which they live and what it means to them; a focus on people's lived experiences". Similarly, Creswell (2013) posits that the best criterion to determine the use of phenomenology is when the research problem requires a profound understanding of human experiences common to a group of people consisting of 3 to 15 members.

### Participants

A total of 27 schools (17 in the Leribe district and 10 in the Botha-Bothe) were sampled for this study. There are ten districts in Lesotho. The latest statistics of 2014 showed that Leribe district is the largest with a total of 199 Primary schools, 1746 teachers and a total enrolment of 55 915 learners. Botha-Bothe district has a total of 82 Primary Schools, 760 teachers and a total enrolment of 22259 learners (Bureau of Statistics, 2015). Four participants, comprising 1 school principal, 1 SB chairperson and 2 other members, were selected from each of these 27 schools, thus giving a total of 108 (51 Female and 57 male) participants for the study. Several factors were considered in deciding on the two districts. Firstly, Lesotho is divided into three regions, the highlands, lowlands and foothills. The roads are very poor in the highlands, villages and schools are scattered making SB's not to function as expected in that region. On the other hand, the lowlands are relatively densely populated, roads are good, but the area is over researched. Our two districts Leribe and Botha-Bothe are in the foothills region and in choosing them we considered the two extremes of the highlands and the lowlands. Roads are passable in the foothills, schools are not so scattered and SB's are functional. Although the discussion on the population and sample in research is held with the intention of making inferences from samples about the population, it is important at this stage to point out that pure phenomenological research seeks to describe rather than explain (Conrad & Serlin, 2006). Phenomenological studies make detailed comments about individual situations that do not lend themselves to direct generalizations in the same way it is sometimes claimed for survey research. Although this might be viewed as a weakness, phenomenological research can still be robust in indicating the presence of factors and their effects in individual cases.

### Selection Technique

The samples or participants in phenomenological research are generally chosen according to "purposive sampling". Purposive sampling is characterized by the incorporation of specific criteria met by the participants at

the moment of selection. Conrad and Serlin (2006) show that purposeful sampling is appropriate in qualitative research as it allows one to choose cases that are interesting, convenient and representative. This study's participating schools were selected based on the existence of a fully functional School Board as a requirement by law (Lesotho Education Act, 2010).

## **6. RESEARCH INSTRUMENTS**

Bandura (2001) provides fourteen different self-efficacy scales with an argument that these scales can be developed for a wide domain of functioning. Particularly relevant for this paper is the Parental Self-Efficacy Scale (p 329) – a questionnaire that was designed to assist towards gaining a better understanding of the matters that create difficulties for parents regarding their children's academic development. Despite some of the questions therein focusing on parenting in general, the scale was considered relevant given that the questions raised are appropriate for the tasks expected of SB members. Although Bandura proposed 'self-efficacy scales' where respondents rated their confidence on a 0 – 100 scale; critics point to several weaknesses within these 100-point probability scales (Redmond, 2010) and suggested a simpler response format. Betz, Borgen and Harmon (1996) applied Bandura's self-efficacy theory and proposed a simpler questionnaire for Skills Confidence Inventory (SCI) which has not only become popular among scholars but has remained as standard practice today. The five-point scale responses obtained from using the SCI questionnaire responses are as follows: very high level = 5; high level = 4; moderate level = 3; little confidence = 2 and very little confidence = 1. Hence, a five-point SCI questionnaire based on the tasks expected of SGB members together with an interview schedule were developed and used to collect data in this study.

There are contestations between phenomenologists and humanist researchers over the collection of data. Proponents of phenomenology suggest that the most appropriate data collection strategy for a phenomenological research is the profound interview. However, more recent humanist and feminist researchers refute the possibility of starting without preconceptions or bias and emphasize the importance of clarity on interpretations and meanings placed on findings, as well as making the researcher visible in the 'frame' of the research as an interested and subjective actor rather than a detached and impartial observer (Noble & Smith, 2015). Therefore, this study's decision to use the SCI questionnaire framed around the self-efficacy theory was based precisely on the above noted view.

### **Data trustworthiness**

Unlike quantitative researchers who apply statistical methods to establish validity and reliability of research findings, qualitative researchers design and incorporate methodological strategies that seek to ensure the trustworthiness

of their findings (Noble & Smith, 2015). Some of this study's strategies included triangulation, designing a questionnaire in local language (Sesotho) as well as an English equivalent, the piloting of data collection instruments, audio recording of respondents, further probing or member checking during interviews, and verbatim transcriptions of responses. All these efforts were used to ensure the trustworthiness of the findings.

### Ethical considerations

Permission to carry out the research in the selected schools was applied for and duly granted by the Faculty of Humanities' Ethical Clearance Committee at the Central University of Technology – Free State as well as the respective Senior Education Officers in the districts under study. Participants gave their informed consent to take part in the study.

## 7. RESULTS

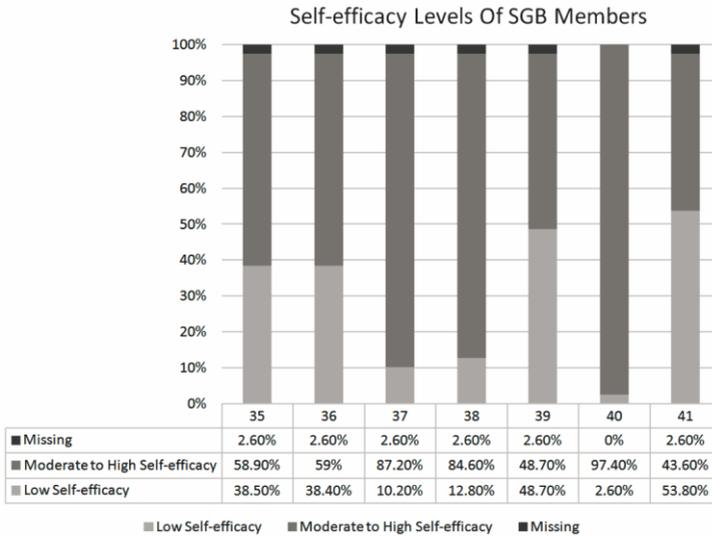
The study's Section C of the Skills Confidence Inventory (SCI) questionnaire was designed in a way that linked items from 35 to 41 with the School Board members' emotional cues regarding their potential to cope with the following SGB roles:

- Item 35 – their standard of education in relation to school governance roles
- Item 36 - their capability to make their school a better place to learn
- Item 37 - their capability to have a say in what is taught in their school
- Item 38 – their profession in relation to effective functioning of the school board
- Item 39 – the capability of the training they received as a school board member
- Item 40 – their capability to get parents involved in the activities of the school
- Item 41– their capability to interpret the sections of the act which deal with school governance.

The data were gathered and analyzed. The results obtained are presented below.

| Item | Low Self-efficacy (levels 1-2) | Moderate to High Self-efficacy (levels 3 – 5) | Missing | Mean | SD    |
|------|--------------------------------|---|---------|------|-------|
| 35   | 38.5%                          | 58.9%   | 2.6%    | 3.49 | ±0.18 |
| 36   | 38.4%                          | 59%   | 2.6%    | 3.51 | ±0.21 |
| 37   | 10.2%                          | 87.2%   | 2.6%    | 4.53 | ±0.09 |
| 38   | 12.8%                          | 84.6%   | 2.6%    | 4.37 | ±0.11 |
| 39   | 48.7%                          | 48.7%   | 2.6%    | 2.97 | ±0.21 |
| 40   | 2.6%                           | 97.4%   | 0%      | 4.63 | ±0.30 |
| 41   | 53.8%                          | 43.6%   | 2.6%    | 2.61 | ±0.07 |

**Figure 3:** Responses from SB members on their self-efficacy beliefs (n=108)



**Figure 4:** Responses of SB members (n=108)

Readers need to note three important things in their interpretation of the results. Firstly, they need to note that the conversion from skills confidence inventory to self-efficacy levels, as indicated in the Figures 3 and 4, is consistent with Betz *et al.* (1996) who adopted the synonymous term skills confidence to describe (self-efficacy) as that which is measured by the Skills Confidence Inventory (SCI). Secondly, they need to note that the collapsing of moderate and high-levels of efficacy into one category follows Betz *et al.* (1996) who contend that moderate (level 3) confidence scores significantly provide an appropriate cut-off level for predicting positive performance. Thirdly, it is worth noting that tables and graphs are used in qualitative studies mainly for descriptive purposes and not for making any inferences. Hence, figures 3 and 4 were developed mainly to enhance descriptions.

The results from Figures 3 and 4 suggest that most respondents had moderate to high levels of self-efficacy. This moderate to high levels of self-efficacy related to their (a) standard of education in relation to school governance roles (58.9%); (b) capability to make their schools a better place to learn (59%); (c) capability to have a say in what is taught in their schools (87.2%); (d) professional qualifications in relation to school governance roles (84.6%); and (e) capability to get parents involved in the activities of the school. Furthermore, an equal number of respondents reported high self-efficacy (48.7%) as well as low self-efficacy (48.7%) with respect to the training they had received as school board members. Finally, most respondents (53.8%) had low levels of self-efficacy with respect to their capability to interpret the sections of the act which deal with school governance.

## 8. DISCUSSION

Given the fact that the overall purpose of any research is to find an answer to the research question, we start by drawing the reader's attention to the purpose of this article, which was to examine the extent to which school board members perceived their school governance roles as challenges to be mastered or as threats to be avoided.

### *Moderate to high self-efficacy beliefs*

The results show that respondents had moderate to high self-efficacy beliefs in 5 out of 7 governance tasks that were the focus of this study. Following the self-efficacy theory, it can be argued that school board members perceived their school governance roles as challenges to be mastered rather than threats to be avoided. This indicates that respondents had positive attitudes towards their governance roles. An explanation of this disconnection is imperative owing to the abundance of literature pointing to the dysfunctionality of SB members. A summary of the review of previous studies shows that, SB's have been adjudged as dysfunctional based on their capacity to govern (Xaba, 2011), the effectiveness of their training (Tsoetsi, Vann Wyk & Lemmer, 2008), lack of necessary knowledge and skills (Mestry, 2006; Chaka, 2008), illiteracy (Van Wyk, 2004), allegiance to constituencies (Xaba, 2011), and their perceptions of teachers and school principals (Mncube, 2009). Juxtaposed against this summary, the results of our study point to two important yawning gaps within these previous findings. Firstly, the reviewed studies did not focus on the SB members' judgment of their own capabilities; that is the self-efficacy beliefs that they held about their governance roles. This also suggests that the interventions planned for SB members ignored their self-efficacy beliefs. This is despite empirical evidence suggesting that self-efficacy beliefs surpass past performance as a predictor of future performance (Bandura & Locke, 2003). In fact, results from 30 years of research on self-efficacy clearly indicate that simply training people on skills does not ensure that they will be motivated to apply them. Instead, people need both the skills and the will to function successfully within different domains and under a variety of circumstances. Hence, according to Bandura's theory, self-efficacy beliefs are the foundation of human agency as they have a major influence on future success since they lead to action or inaction.

The second gap links with Bandura's argument that high self-efficacy combined with a responsive environment leads to successful accomplishment of tasks. In unpacking this issue, we ask; 'If SB members have moderate to high self-efficacy beliefs about their governing roles, who then views them as dysfunctional?' It is our argument that, as is common practice in education, the fundamental attribution error (FAE), also called the correspondence bias, resurfaces when it comes to school governance issues. FAE describes the tendency by observers to attribute other people's

behaviour to their internal or dispositional factors while downplaying other mitigating factors (Gilbert & Malone, 1995). For instance, principals and educators tend to apportion blame for the difficulties in executing school governing functions to the parents' low levels of education (Xaba, 2011). This is confirmed by answers we got from a question raised during the interviews with school principals that: *'Do you think your School Board members understand their role well in your view?'* where one principal stated:

*Some may seem to understand. But the majority still lack understanding. The point is they rely too much on the principal. Even when you give them circulars from the Ministry of Education, they just read without understanding.*

The observations, however, are that, parents blame educators for undermining them and looking down upon them because of their so-called illiteracy (Xaba, 2011). The use of the terms 'undermining', 'looking down upon' and 'so-called illiteracy' suggests that SB members do not share the same views as those who judge them as ineffective. The manifestation of power relations is clearly observed here (Mncube, 2009). Even in the cases where parents are extremely knowledgeable about their rights, the findings show that parents do not always use their rights, which include the right to ask more questions about underperforming educators. In fact, similar results were shown in a study by Mupindu (2012) where the elected SB members confirmed that they had the capacity to execute the responsibilities if only they were given the power to make decisions. This suggests that parents, particularly those in rural schools, are not operating in a responsive environment since they are not given sufficient opportunity to participate in crucial decision-making processes affecting the life of the school, and hence implicitly or explicitly excluded.

#### *Low self-efficacy beliefs regarding implementation of the Education Act 2010*

The responses on question 41 stand out when compared with all the other questions raised under this category of questions. Specifically, the question asked respondents whether they felt confident to interpret the sections of the 2010 Lesotho Education Act which deal with the governance roles of SB members. A relatively small percentage (43.6%) of the respondents felt they had enough knowledge to interpret the Act while the majority (53.8%) of respondents felt they do not have enough confidence to interpret and implement it. According to the self-efficacy theory, the holding of negative thoughts and fears about their capabilities by SB members can lower self-efficacy perceptions and trigger additional stress and agitation that ultimately results in the inadequate performance of their tasks. These results are similar to Xaba's (2011) who concluded that challenges regarding the roles of SB's seem to be located mainly in the implementation of the functions and roles prescribed in the School Act. In one of the interviews we held with the school principals we sought an explanation on why this was the case. One school principal said:

*The legal requirements are drawn from a variety of documents and so this requires School Board members, including myself, to be familiar with the Constitution, the Education Act and various regulations and circulars. Within these documents, there is also the terminology and legal language used which create challenges for us as laymen.*

The above comments indicate that the SB's lack of knowledge and understanding of their legal roles and responsibilities seem to perpetuate the wide spread phenomenon of dysfunctional schools (Maluleka, 2008). In this regard, Grant-Lewis and Naidoo (2006) argue that the bureaucratic listing of SGB roles and responsibilities requires that SB's be trained to enable them to understand the legalese.

### *Other emerging themes from the participants' responses*

Despite the fact that the four research questions provided a structure with which the findings were analysed; literature on phenomenological studies cautions that researchers should be faithful to the participants (Padilla-Diaz, 2015). There is an ethical issue about misrepresenting, distorting or deleting findings that would have been provided in good faith by participants. It is for this reason that this section of the findings focuses on those findings that emerged outside the structure that had been preconceived by the researchers. One of the themes that emerged concerns itself with whether or not SB members had been involved in disciplinary cases against an educator or whether they would partake if it ever took place. A total of 59% reported that they had not been involved in the disciplinary cases of their educators while 28.2% of the respondents reported that they had. Respondents also commented on their involvement in determining the promotion, demotion or transfer of an educator. A substantial percentage (61.5%) of the participants' responses ranged from "not at all" to "not sure". This result stands against a percentage of 33.3 of those who reported they had played a role in their schools in that regard. These figures confirm earlier concerns that traditionally schools tended to keep parents out, using the argument that a professional skill such as teaching must be carried out without interference. Hence, the school, in such circumstances is considered as something outside of parents and communities.

## **9. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS**

It appears, in consistence with Bandura's theory that, researchers have done much to understand the different factors affecting the effective functioning of school governing boards. However, the results from this study indicate that school governing board members have a moderate to high self-efficacy belief about their governing roles. This indicates further that they have the will to perform and yet various studies done to date seem to be characterized by a fundamental attribution error which attributes other people's behaviour to failure of a system while downplaying other mitigating factors. Bandura's

theory suggests that people's positive attitude towards their abilities coupled with a responsive environment promotes success and improves long term-motivation. Further research is therefore needed to understand what constitutes this responsive environment that promotes success for school governance.

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