

Education Reform and School Size: Stakeholder Perspectives on the Shift from Small Independent Not-for-Profit School to a Large Profit-Driven School

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ABSTRACT

During apartheid in South Africa, the quality of education varied significantly across cultural and racial groups, resulting in systemic inequality. Following the democratic transition in 1994, the South African government initiated education reform by allowing the establishment of independent schools. Since then, the independent school sector has diversified, giving rise to various models, including both not-for-profit and profit-driven institutions. This study investigates stakeholders' experiences of the transition from small, not-for-profit independent schools to larger, profit-driven models. A qualitative multiple case study design was employed, with data collected through semi-structured face-to-face interviews. Thematic analysis was used to interpret the data gathered from two independent schools in Gauteng that underwent this transition. Initially, the shift appeared to be beneficial for stakeholders: principals, teachers, parents, learners, and school governors, such as owners, CEOs, and church managers. This study provides insights into the evolving nature of independent schooling in South Africa and contributes to the discourse on education reform by highlighting stakeholder concerns and offering guidance for managing such transitions more effectively.

1. Introduction

Historically, education in South Africa can be divided into two groups. Pre-1994 choice of schools was limited, and parents did not participate in the school's decision-making processes. They were stakeholders without a voice and sometimes without enough information regarding decisions made by principals and the rest of the school's management team (deputy head and head of departments). Parents did not have a choice of the best school (or school of choice and area) for their children. Before 1994, apartheid forced parents to enrol their children into a school according to their racial demographic, and there was a significant difference in the quality of education in different areas.

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Since 1994 the education system in South Africa has changed from a system that provides high-quality education to an exclusive section of the population to an inclusive, equitable education system. This new education system had to rectify the inequalities of the education system that prevailed during the Apartheid era (Breedt, 2022).

South Africa became a democratic country, and the government used education as part of the transformation process. As stipulated in Section 29 of the Constitution of 1996, parents become part of School Governing Bodies (SGB) in public schools. This governance approach allowed parents to take part in decision-making and have transparency as well as a vote and suggestion regarding the financial management, language and the appointment of teachers at the school.

This new approach came with frustration and difficulties for parents who were never involved in this kind of decision-making as part of the School Governing Body (SGB). Wealthy parents took charge of the governance of the schools, and other parents could not voice their decisions. Principals and parents on the SGB had difficulties trusting each other, and this caused tension between the members of the governing body and staff. Some of these decisions were taken out of context, and the teachers and principal were "bullied" by parents (Xaba, 2011; Mngomezulu, Lawrence and Mabusela, 2021).

This new educational system contributes to the freedom of the choice of language of education as well as the freedom of religion in education as stipulated in Sections 15, 29, 30 and 31 of the Constitution of 1996. Providing freedom of religion and the opportunity of being educated in one's mother tongue contributed to the system that oversees how the power is distributed between the stakeholders who form part of the independent schools and the governors of a school. As part of the change in 1994, the Department of Basic Education allowed schools to function independently (Breedt, 2022:23).

Both stakeholders and governors embraced independence, and parents could enrol their children in a school that meets their needs.

2. Problem Statement

Public schools in South Africa faced a crisis due to overpopulation and a shortage of schools (Modisaotsile, 2012). Overpopulated schools and a high learner-to-teacher ratio resulted in the absenteeism of teachers (Jordaan, 2019). Independent schools started in South Africa to provide educational options according to the different needs of the diverse population in the country and to address this critical issue faced by education. However, private companies realised that this investment could also benefit them financially. From a marketing and investment perspective, a high demand provides a growing investment for any shareholder (Mupunga, 2019). Theron (2017) predicted that independent education is a good investment for the private sector and an opportunity for any investor. If investment and profit become the main reason for shareholders to invest in a company, the problem could occur that quality of education could be replaced by quantity. This research will focus on the change from a small not-for-profit school to a sizeable profit-driven school with better facilities and more learners.

3. Rationale

The stakeholders of independent schools (school leaders, teachers, parents and learners) face challenges when a school changes from not-for-profit to profit-driven. The main purpose of Independent Schools is to produce customer-specific education. Independent schools allow for more flexibility regarding the method of teaching and learning. Some schools started with a specific religion as part of their education, and others have a specific teaching and learning strategy. Fully Independent Schools in South Africa do not receive any subsidy from the government and need to get their income from the learners who enrol in their school. This could contribute to the challenges independent school governors face in the current economic times. Terminology like "bums-on-seats" explains the importance of keeping the numbers high enough to be profitable to function as an independent school. With this research, the experience of stakeholders after the change of governance from not-for-profit to profit-driven could contribute to a smooth transformation process where all stakeholders experience the change as a positive transparent process.

4. Literature Review

4.1. Independent Schools in South Africa

Independent schools can be divided into two main categories: Profit-driven and Non-Profit Schools. An article in the Mail and Guardian magazine of August 2019 explained that Independent schools play a pivotal part in South African education. Mupunga (2019) stated the following:

Private education companies address the critical education issue in South Africa, which is an important investment consideration, giving growing investor awareness of environmental, social and governance considerations in the investment.

This is just one example of the good investment opportunities that are possible in independent schools. These investments could contribute to the quality of education and availability of schooling in South Africa. However, it could also contribute to financial advantages for investors. As discussed earlier in paragraph 1, freedom of religion and teaching methods were some of the reasons for the start of Independent Schools.

A non-profit association for independent schools focuses on the curriculum followed by the independent school and matters regarding governance. The vision of the Independent Schools Association of Southern Africa (ISASA) includes quality education available to all learners. Because independent schools do not receive any funding from the government, the above-mentioned vision is not always possible. Non-profit schools and profit-driven schools mainly receive money from parents. This contributes to the fact that school fees could be much higher than public schools, and investors could see this as a good investment to have as little as possible input to gain a large profit. Ryan (2019) establishes that independent schools have become a growing investment but are not affordable enough to lower the burden of the public sector.

Independent schools could improve the socio-economic status in South Africa by reducing the school-learner-teacher capacity gap, but the main reasons for starting an independent school could be because of the excellent business opportunity, with no purpose to improve the socio-economic status. Mupunga (2019) explains how straightforward the process of starting an independent school is. Once they break even, they start making a profit and quality education could not be as important as the amount of learners enrolled to make sure they make a profit.

The business model is simple but effective. Once a school is built in a good location and the cost structure is right, it becomes a case of bums on seats. The operational leverage is high, and after a school breaks even, additional enrolments fall through to the profit line (Mupunga, 2019).

If the need for profit becomes more important than the need for quality education, independent schools do not support public education and contribute to a better socio-economic status in South Africa.

In this research, stakeholders' (principals, heads of departments, teachers, parents) experiences regarding the change in schools from a non-profit small school to profit-driven were looked at.

4.2. Factors that Influence Parents' Choice of Independent Schools

The focus of independent schools was mainly to adapt to the needs of different families. Torres (2019) from the National Association of Independent Schools researched why parents choose an independent school for their children. Some of the reasons include the following:

- A school needs to address the obstacles that their child might experience.
- If a child is intelligent and emotionally mature, the school must help the child reach his/her full potential.
- A school needs to focus on emotional development and not just the academic curriculum.
- A school that offers different activities that allow the child to fulfil his/her dreams.

In South Africa, independent schools have become an important part of education to provide more schools to compensate for the shortage of public schools.

Dunlop (2012) contends, "while government schools are vanishing, more private schools are opening."

Section 29 (1) (a) of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996a) stipulates that everyone has the right to basic education. The regulations and laws governing education include public or independent schools as provided in the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996a) and SASA (RSA, 1996b). In terms of Section 29 (3) of the Constitution of 1996 (RSA, 1996a), everyone has the right to establish an independent school. (Breedt, 2022, p. 64)

With the above in mind, parents and owners could start an independent school focusing on a specific religious culture and approach. In 2013, the Council of America Private Education (CAPE) conducted a survey to identify why parents choose private (independent) schools. Some of the reasons for their choice include a better learning environment, better education, smaller class sizes, more individual attention, religious education and better college preparation (CAPE, 2013).

Parents prefer independent schools to ensure their children receive more individual attention in smaller classes. The question arose as to whether the owners or shareholders of independent schools still consider parents' preference when they try to increase the size of the classes to make sure the school makes a profit. Parents have pre-determined ideas and reasons why they choose a specific school to enrol their children, one of the most important reasons is to make sure their children receive good quality education. According to a publication in UNESCO (2004) good education could be defined as fit for purpose if the quality of input, process and output are being evaluated. Basic education is not only the provision of education (online or

face-to-face). Sustainable Development Goal 4 provides quality education (UNESCO, 2004; UNDP, 2023).

5. Conceptual Framework

The purpose of the research is to understand the experience of stakeholders after the change in ownerships from a very small independent school to a large profit-driven school that focus on profit and the amount of learners in a class. “South African private school networks have reported strong growth for the past financial year” (Jacobs, 2025). According to Greyling (2024) there are two large independent school associations that fight for market share, and both offer good investment cases. This confirms that independent South African schools become shareholders' investments. Money and profit become critical aspects of the school, and "bums on seat" is important to ensure the investment is profitable. A conceptual framework based on the input, process and output approach will be used to determine if a bigger school could still produce the kind of education stakeholders were used to before the change (Garira, 2020). To determine the quality of education in a school, each school needs to have a School Self-Evaluation (SSE) in place whereby the school assess their conditions, processes and outputs to determine where they need to improve (Carlson, 2009). In this research, the stakeholders' experiences (with a focus on the parents) will be viewed against a conceptual framework based on the School Self-Evaluation. As illustrated in Figure 1, concepts like context, school level, input, process and output will be used as a conceptual framework. Parts of this figure are taken from the conceptual framework designed by Garira (2020, p.2). The original conceptual framework includes the National Level, Pre-school Level, Tertiary Education Level, and the classroom. In this research, only the School Level will be used. Even though parents are not attending the school, their experience of the school is from the information they gain from their children and the interaction they have with the teachers. The process in the conceptual framework, includes decision-making by school administrators on the allocation of resources, the support for teachers and also beginner teachers. These decisions will be determined by the type of school. Sections of the classroom and on National Level, Pre-School and Tertiary Education will not be used.

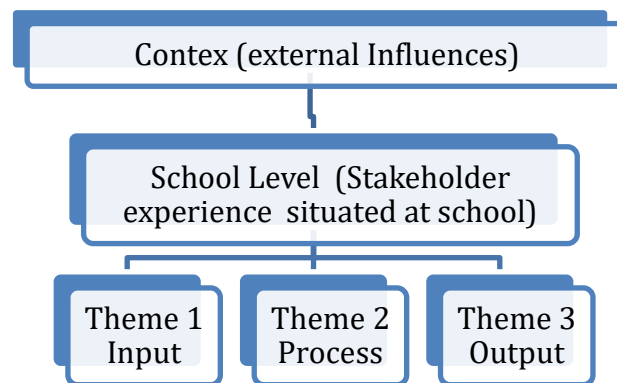


Figure 1: The Conceptual Framework - Author adapted from Garira (2020, p. 2)

Please refer to the Table 1 to explain the Themes and Sub-Themes.

Table 1: Conceptual Framework

INPUT	PROCESS	OUTPUT
Conditions that shape the school environment	What happens inside the School	What stakeholders experience as outcomes
<p>Sub-Theme 1: Holistic School Identity and Values Shift from family-centred, community-oriented ethos Parents losing voice in decision-making Disappearance of personalised relationships between staff, parents, and learners.</p>	<p>Sub-Theme 1: Support for Teaching and Learning Teachers experiencing heavier workloads Less individual support for learners Restricted parental participation Governors disconnected from classroom realities</p>	<p>Sub-Theme 1: Learner Achievement and Academic Standards Parents and teachers are noticing an inconsistency in academic quality Fewer opportunities for individual attention Pressure to maintain high pass rates despite larger classes</p>
<p>Sub-Theme 2: Resources and Class Size Rapid increase in learner numbers Deterioration of infrastructure Insufficient technological and learning resources Rising teacher-learner ratios Concerns about unqualified teacher appointments</p>	<p>Sub-Theme 2: Professional Development Training perceived as irrelevant “tick-box” activities Teachers attending generic workshops unrelated to classroom needs Pressure on teachers to assist with marketing and recruitment</p>	<p>Sub-Theme 2; Social and Emotional Development Holistic learner support is declining Reduced nurturing environment Parents described the school as becoming “a sausage machine”</p>
<p>Sub-Theme 3: Governance Transparency Reduced communication from governors Lack of clarity regarding teacher recruitment and appointments Stakeholders sensing decision-making is centralised and opaque</p>	<p>Sub-Theme 3: Supervision and Support Structures Minimal oversight from governors Teachers feeling unsupported, isolated or overwhelmed Declining morale and increased stress levels</p>	

6. Research Methodology and Design

The study employed a qualitative multiple case study design to explore the experiences of key stakeholders (teachers, heads of departments, and parents), during the transition of two independent schools in Gauteng from not-for-profit governance to profit-driven ownership. A qualitative approach was selected because it enables the in-depth exploration of participants’ perceptions, meanings, and lived experiences within their natural contexts (Creswell, 2014). Semi-structured interviews were used as the primary method of data generation, allowing for flexibility, probing, and detailed narrative accounts.

6.1. Research Design

A multiple case study design (Yin, 2016) was appropriate as the study examined two independent schools undergoing a similar governance transition. This design enabled comparison across sites while preserving the contextual uniqueness of each school. The two cases served as “information-rich” contexts for understanding how different stakeholder groups navigated organisational change.

6.2. Sampling Strategy

A purposive sampling strategy was used to identify participants who had direct experience with the governance transition. Inclusion criteria were:

- Individuals who had been part of the school both before and after the governance change.
- Participants representing key stakeholder groups
- Individuals willing to provide informed sent.

Exclusion criteria included:

- New staff or recently enrolled parents with insufficient exposure to transition
- Stakeholders are unable to participate in English.

A total of 20 participants were included across two schools (see Table 2 Section 6.4), outlining the demographic profile and codes assigned to each participant.

6.3. Recruitment Procedures

Initial contact was made with school principals who acted as gatekeepers by distributing information letters to eligible participants. Interested individuals contacted the researcher directly. No incentives were offered. All participants provided written informed consent and were reminded that participation was voluntary and withdrawable at any time.

6.4. Participant Profile

For this particular article, the focus will only be on the data collected from teachers and parents as outlined in Table 2:

Table 2: Codes assigned to participants

	School A	Years at School	School B	Years at School
Heads of Departments	HD-1A HD-2A HD-3A	8 5 10	HD-1B HD-2B	5 6
Teachers	T-1A T-2A T-3A T-4A	5 7 4 5	T-1B T-2B T-3B T-4B	7 7 5 7
Parents	Pa-1A Pa-2A Pa-3A Pa-4A	8 8 5 6	Pa-1B Pa-2B Pa-3B	6 7 7
Number of participants	11		9	

6.5. Data Collection Procedures

Data were collected through semi-structured, face-to-face interviews lasting 35 to 60 minutes. Interviews were held in private rooms at the schools to ensure comfort and confidentiality. With permission, all interviews were audio-recorded and accompanied by field notes capturing

expressions, tone and contextual observations. Separate semi-structured interview guides were developed for each stakeholder group (teachers, HODs, parents). Questions focused on:

- Perceptions of governance change
- Class size and workload
- Resource provision
- Transparency and communication
- Educational quality.

The flexible format allowed participants to elaborate freely, and probing questions were used to deepen responses.

6.6. Data Saturation

Data saturation was reached when no new themes emerged across stakeholder groups. Saturation occurred after 18 interviews, but two additional interviews were conducted to ensure depth and to confirm theme stability.

6.7. Data Analysis

Thematic analysis was conducted following Braun and Clarke's (2006) six-phase approach:

- Familiarisation: All interviews were transcribed verbatim and read repeatedly.
- Initial Coding: Open coding was used to capture meaningful units of data.
- Theme Development: Codes were grouped into potential themes aligned with the input-process-output conceptual framework.
- Reviewing Themes: Themes were refined and checked for internal coherence.
- Defining and Naming Themes: Final themes and subthemes were clearly articulated.
- Producing the Report: Extracts were selected to illustrate each theme.

Although the researcher conducted the primary coding, analytic rigour was strengthened through peer debriefing with a qualitative research colleague, who reviewed the coding structure for clarity and coherence. Reflexive memos were kept throughout the analysis to account for the researcher's positionality as a specialist in teaching and learning.

6.8. Ethical Considerations

Ethical clearance was obtained from the Ethics Committee (Protocol number. . .). Confidentiality was ensured through the use of pseudonyms for both schools and participants. Digital recordings and transcripts were securely stored on a password-protected device. Participation was voluntary, and no identifying information was reported.

7. Presentation of the Data

Although the primary research was about the change in governance from not-for-profit to profit-driven governance, parents and teachers provided substantial information regarding the size of the school and the quality of education as they experienced it.

The data used in this article will be structured as indicated in Figure 2.

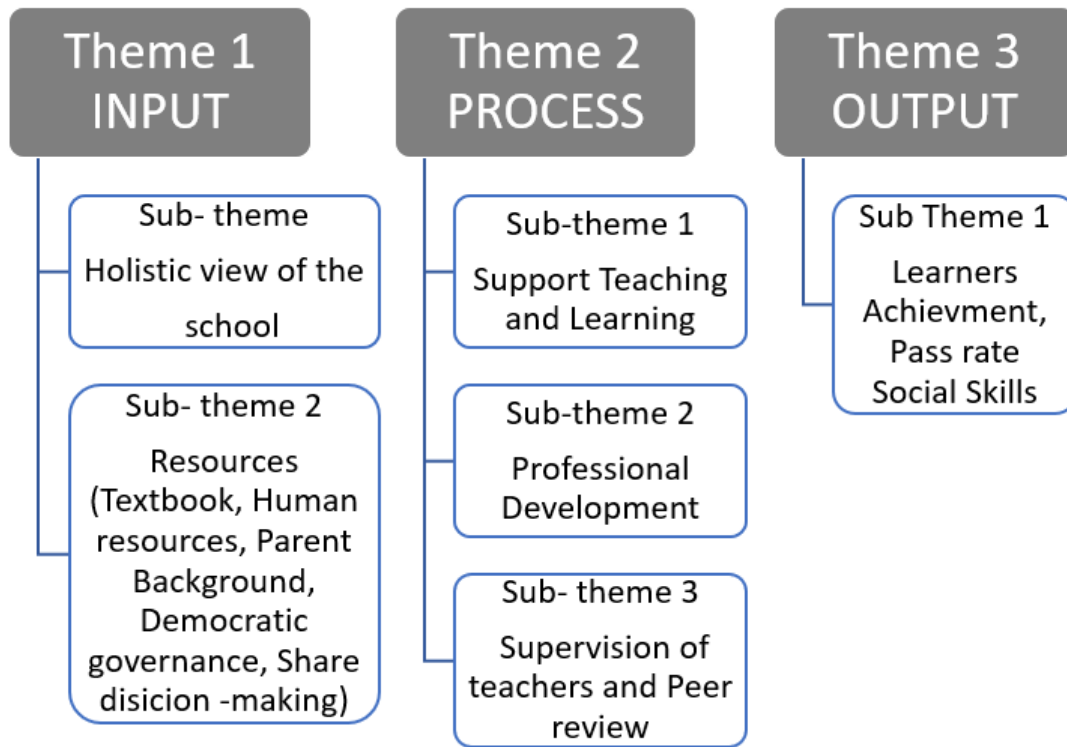


Figure 2: Themes and sub-themes

7.1. Input

Inputs in school may include human and material resources. Different schools were started with a specific speciality in mind, and the methods of curriculum transfer to learners could differ. The application and use of resources will also depend on the vision and mission of the school as well as the level at which education is offered to learners (Gariria, 2020). The school's context needs to be considered when the quality of education is evaluated. The involvement of parents needs to be taken into consideration as well as the support children receive regarding stationery, homework completion and the social environment where the children grow up. In this research, the independent school changed from a small not-for-profit governance school to a profit-driven governance. The experience of the parents and teachers regarding curriculum and resources is discussed below.

7.1.1 Holistic View of the School

Some of the shareholders explained that the previous not-for-profit governors focused on academics and the well-being of the families involved in the school. Parent Pa-B1 said the following:

They looked after the whole family. Each class had a parent representative, and together with the teacher, we supported the family. The governors knew the family and supported them when things were tough. Now no one cares.

Parent Pa-B1 expanded on this point as follows:

The parents were involved quite a lot. We knew what was happening and how it was happening, and we had input. We were quite involved. When it was still a not-for-profit school the parents were involved quite a lot. Whether it was because we were still small, our classes were still small, it was quite nice when

we were sort of involved in the education. With the new governors, it is a big change. We lost our voice; you don't know whether you are coming or going. Luckily, the teachers are still the same and try to reassure us about things, but then you see certain things and you know it is not the same.

Shared decision-making from parents is part of the input that will contribute to the holistic view of the school. This multiple-case study showed that greater personal attention was also given to learners and their families when the school was smaller. Parents felt they played a part in their children's education and worked with the teachers to achieve success.

Similarly, Pa-B2 explained parental involvement under the previous governors as follows:

I don't think there was a proper structure like a PAF, but I think the parents were involved. A lot of the parents were involved in the finances of the school, and I think there were a lot of people who had a say about stuff. After the change, there were talks about a PAF [Parents Association Forum]. There was talk about getting a group together, but it was as if the parents were against the school, but it was a head office issue. They wanted to find out what qualifications the teachers had.

Parent Pa-A1 said that, with the large classes, it seemed to be difficult for the teachers to focus on the quality of the academic work:

I think teachers try their best to enforce high standards of academic work, but it gets exceedingly difficult to keep on doing that, not to be discouraged.

The following focuses on the experience of parents and small points which they notice after the change in ownership. Parents experienced a change in academic standards after the class size. A Head of the Department explained she is thankful that the school is not under the ownership of the church (previous governors) and explained that the church dictate their teaching.

I am glad we changed; you can't have the people of the church tell me how to run my class. The church had a dream and whatever we do, it had to be in line with the church. (HD-A1).

However, one of the teachers was very concerned about the quality of the new appointments after the change in ownership.

When they appoint teachers, they do not care what they are capable of and don't care about the quality of education. That specific teacher told the learners that cotton is growing on sheep [sic].

This creates a huge concern regarding the quality of education that takes place. Parent Pa-B3 explained: "*It is more about cutting corners, cutting costs at the expense of quality of education in the school*". The fact that the school became bigger changed the quality of education from the parent's perspective.

Parent Pa-B3 mentioned that parents wanted to know the qualifications of the teachers. One can assume that this was indicative that parents did not trust the decisions and appointments made by the governors: "*They do employ some teachers that are not qualified. They are not registered at SACE (South African Council for Educators*" (Pa-B3). This comment was repeated almost *verbatim* by one of the teachers at School B (T-B1):

When they appoint teachers, they do not care what they are capable of and don't care about the quality of education. That specific teacher told the learners that cotton is growing on sheep [sic].

If the school grew in size, but the class and teacher-learner ratio stayed the same, the same quality could be delivered. However, from the experience of the parents and teachers, the size of the school did influence the type of education learners received.

7.1.2 Resources

Different resources could influence the level of education provided to learners. A Head of Department explained that the terrain and infrastructure are not reviewed after the change in ownership. They experienced the new "bigger" school looking worse than the previous small not-for-profit school.

At this stage, when we were part of the not-for-profit company, it was the case that they looked after the buildings and after the terrain and everything. But at this stage, nothing happens. It looks like a school in an extremely poor community and not an independent school (HD-B3).

A teacher from School A (T- A1) explained that they had to increase their teacher-to-learner ratio, which is the opposite of why parents enrol their children in an independent school. The teacher did not experience any support from the governance.

I believe they are aware of the number of learners in our classes, as I have noticed a significant increase in my teaching load. Personally, in my current position, I feel overutilised. I only have two free periods per week, which is insufficient. Compared to the previous arrangement—where I had more time during the day to take a break or enjoy a cup of tea—I now feel somewhat overwhelmed by the workload

The larger class size is completely opposite to why parents chose an independent school. If the school's focus is to provide an investment for the shareholders, it could cause a problem regarding the quality of education. If the school increases in numbers, but the classes remain the same size, it could indicate a high quality of education. As soon as it becomes "bums on chairs", there could be a possibility that the quality is not what is expected from the parents, who pay a high school fee.

Teacher T-B3 said:

If I think about the resources of the school. They are not putting anything into the school. There is no support from their side. We are even struggling to get textbooks from them.

Equipment forms a vital component of the resources required for a successful school, particularly one that aims to deliver education aligned with modern developments and technological advancements. In an independent school, parents pay a higher premium school fees than in a public school, and the assumption is that their children will be educated with the best technology, equipment and resources.

A teacher from School B (T-B1) felt that the governors expected them to perform without providing the resources:

The new governors knew we work on iPads when they bought over the school, but now they don't provide Wi-Fi. The principal has difficulties getting money

from the governors to give to us. We have a responsibility toward the children as educators.

The previous not-for-profit small school did make sure they provided all the resources needed to use technology in the class. From the interview, it was clear that the school, under new governors, would like to increase the teacher-learner ratio but provide fewer resources to the learners and the teachers. Support of teaching and learning at a school also contributes to the level of education. All the stakeholders involved need to know what teachers and learners need to provide quality education.

7.2 Process

7.2.1 Support Teaching and Learning

If the teacher-learner ratio is smaller in an independent school, the pressure on teachers is reduced, allowing them to focus more effectively on individual learners and their needs. When the school transitioned from a small not-for-profit institution to a large profit-driven one, teachers experienced an increased workload. Parents previously felt a personal connection with both the teachers and the school, and believed they could contribute to teaching and learning by providing resources and supporting the teachers. They also experienced a more "open access" policy.

However, with the shift to a profit-driven model, both teachers and parents noted a clear distinction between the roles of parents and those of teachers. Parents were expected to adhere strictly to their parenting roles and were no longer encouraged to influence teaching practices.

7.2.2 Professional Development

Personal development and support regarding teaching and learning could be linked. To help learners develop, the school's governance and management team need to know the needs of teachers and on which level they need to develop. T-A2 commented as follows:

We as teachers must go on courses that are core skills driven and twenty-first-century development and such skills are discussed. We must go to a lot of workshops, where, for me I don't feel like it is related to our structure, to high school specifically. In terms of academic matters and development, we must go on these courses, and then it is driven into us what twenty-first-century skills are and that wasn't there before. I come away from those sessions, not having learned more. It is not something that I then go and can apply in my subject.

This teacher experiences these development activities as useless and as only "tick-box" activities with no value to their everyday teaching.

Teacher participant T-A1 explained as follows:

Responsibilities on other levels than teaching in the class grew a lot. I think we are now also responsible for promotion, trying to advertise the school according to what we need financially. We need to try to save more on various aspects, save money here, even to limit the coffee and tea. Therefore, being more responsible for budget. We are limited in the sense that we are not allowed to spend money that is not regulated. We must focus foremost on two things that we need to do: that is teaching and educating and being a mother to a child at school.

From the comment above, it seems as if the school does not recognise the needs of the teachers at their school. When the size of the school increases, the governance and management must ensure that communication with the stakeholders increases to prevent misunderstanding and a feeling of being overwhelmed from the teacher's side. In addition to the above, T-A4 indicated that more pressure is being placed on teachers to recruit more learners.

I do think that there is pressure on teachers. They must feel it is up to them if there are enough students here or not. It is often said that if you don't get these students then you cannot have a raise.

Teachers had to carry the burden of recruiting students to be able to keep their salaries. This could lead to teachers focusing on more than only teaching and helping students reach their full potential. Communication between governors and parents also contributes to support. Teaching must include the relationship between the parents, the school (teachers and governors) and the learners. T-B1 also highlighted the lack of parental involvement:

There were always parents involved with the previous governance. The parents had representatives, like the middle person between the rest of the parents and the teachers.

Teachers' development needs must align with the needs of the teachers and learners in the class.

7.2.3 Supervision of Teachers and Peer Review

Under the previous governance structure, teachers felt that the governors were actively involved in their classrooms and had a clear understanding of what was happening—though this was not through formal supervision or peer review, but rather through general involvement. In contrast, under the new governance model, teachers felt that the governors were disengaged and unaware of classroom activities. Unlike the previous church-based governance, which was more directive, the lack of involvement made some teachers feel isolated and unsupported. From the comment from HD-B1, it seems teachers would rather be supervised or be dictate what they need to do than just be left on their own.

HD-B1 said:

They don't worry about us, no, no, no! If we tell them we are going to lose teachers, it is not a problem. They will be able to fill a post. So, what do we get at the end?

Teachers felt the structure is more fixed and the rules are more strict. With the new governors teachers felt as if they had to work according to specific rules and regulations, and not according to their own pace and manner. This is illustrated by the following responses from teacher participants of School A in particular:

I would say that previously the governors were a bit more relaxed in a sense. The stress levels were a bit lower. The stress is perceived from the governor's side, and we perceive that the management team are more stressed now because of all the different things that need to be in place according to the new governance system. (T-A1)

Well, it was more relaxed, it was a smaller team, it was more personal, and it was not money driven. For me, it was much better than now. (T-A2)

I have more learners from grade eight to grade twelve versus someone who has also got grade eight to twelves with only seven students in a class where I have

twenty-four students in a class. Now they regard it as the same workload. (T-A2)

I do think that there is pressure on teachers that they feel it is up to them to get more students. (T-A4)

7.3 Output

7.3.1 Learner Achievement, Pass Rate, and Social Skills

According to the teachers, the academic standard is part of their work, and they feel accountable to ensure they provide high standards of education. Parents also expect a high level of education for their children because they pay higher school fees for enrolling their children in an independent school than in a public school. Parent Pa-B1 observed that in the larger school (profit-driven governance), individual attention and the nurturing of learners' social and emotional development have significantly declined, with the focus now primarily placed on academic performance. Similarly, Parent Pa-A2 compare the new school environment to a "sausage machine," where the priority seems to be on enrolling as many learners as possible and ensuring they pass, rather than fostering well-rounded individuals. This parent also emphasized that maintaining high academic standards is essential—especially because it aligns with what parents believe they are paying for.

Education is so much more than the reputation of knowledge and the standard of education. We must have the best because we pay a premium. And it is fine to make a profit, but it must never be at the expense of the child's education.

The comment above highlights that parents expect more from the school than just academic education—they value a holistic approach in which learners receive guidance beyond the curriculum to help shape them into well-rounded, responsible citizens. However, this appears to be lacking in the larger school environment.

8. Conclusion

As mentioned previously, independent South African schools have increasingly become shareholder investments, as evidenced by strong financial growth reported by private school networks (Jacobs, 2025) and the competition between two major independent school associations vying for market share, both presenting strong investment opportunities (Greyling, 2024). These schools contribute to education by providing more schools and, in most instances, excellent facilities. From this research, it is evident that profit from the investments becomes a way of directing the management and focus of the school. The only way in which this can be successful is when all stakeholders have as much as possible information directly from the governors.

8.1 Input

Independent schools are often valued for their ability to offer more individualised attention to learners, parents, and staff—an approach that aligns with their original, holistic vision. However, when an independent school grows too large or becomes primarily profit-driven, it risks losing the very qualities that initially set it apart. A school's identity, especially if they have a holistic vision, could serve as one of the reasons why parents choose this specific independent school for their child. This mostly includes smaller (in relation to public school) classes and closer engagement with teachers.

During interviews, both parents and teachers expressed their experiences of the change from a small non-profit school to a larger profit-driven school, not as all negative, but because meaningful change requires transparency and trust. If governance shifts or the school's direction changes, stakeholders must be engaged in open dialogue and feel empowered to raise concerns. Growth can be positive, but it must be managed carefully. An increase in learner numbers should not come at the expense of teacher-learner ratios or the school's foundational values. As one parent noted, education is about more than academic achievement; it's also about nurturing well-rounded individuals—a goal that must remain central, regardless of the school's size or financial goals.

8.2 Process

As a school grows and changes into a larger institution, the structures in the school change. Governance structures change as well as leadership and the management of the school and staff. With an increase of learners, more teachers will be appointed, and more rules and regulations need to be put in place to manage staff. For teachers who were part of the previous smaller school it will feel as if they are starting at a new school, and their responsibilities will also increase. It is neither practical nor fair to expect teachers to maintain the same level of personal engagement while shouldering significantly expanded responsibilities.

It becomes critical for governors and senior management to be transparent in their communication with all stakeholders (teachers, parents and learners). Decision-making need to be transparent to foster trust and prevent miscommunication and gossip between stakeholders.

Even though profit and business are the main purposes of profit-driven institutions, governors must move beyond a purely business-orientated mindset and embrace a more people-centred approach. Changes need to be introduced with sensitivity, and stakeholders need to be included in the process.

8.3 Output

When stakeholders experience change within a school environment, they often express concerns regarding the quality of education. Different stakeholder groups – such as parents, teachers and learners – each define a school's success in their own way. During interviews, it was clear that parents are concerned about the qualifications of the newly appointed teachers. For them, there was no transparency regarding recruitment and appointment under the new governance. Transparency, especially after a change in governance, is very important to all stakeholders. To promote transparency and reassure stakeholders, governors and senior management should consider sharing the qualifications and credentials of new staff members or at least explain the recruitment and minimum qualifications to all stakeholders. Such transparency not only strengthens trust but also reflects a culture of accountability and excellence.

9. Findings

Schools function as integral parts of surrounding communities, and effective schooling depends on constructive relationships among all stakeholders (learners, parents, teachers and governors). As the literature indicates, schools do not operate in isolation; their success is closely linked to the quality of engagement with their communities (Sakowicz, 2022). When a school adopts a provider-driven model, stakeholder expectations and perceptions become even more significant. Stakeholder engagement requires intentional listening and open dialogue

(Jeffery, 2009), and inadequate communication can undermine trust during organisational change.

The research findings indicate that the core challenge was not the school's growth itself but the manner in which change was introduced. Transparent and proactive communication is essential during governance transitions, particularly when shifting from a not-for-profit structure. Clear, timely information and opportunities for stakeholders to ask questions, supported by honest, direct responses, are critical for building confidence (Hadziahmetović & Salihović, (2022).

A lack of communication can lead to assumptions, mistrust, and the spread of misinformation, all of which can damage the school's reputation and influence parents' enrolment decisions. The data further show that management perceived the changes more positively than other stakeholder groups, likely because they had greater access to contextual information and rationale for the transformation. This discrepancy highlights the need for governors to engage not only with management but with teachers, parents, and learners as distinct stakeholder groups.

While growth and increased financial capacity can benefit a school, expansion should be accompanied by clear explanations of how staff will be supported and how the change aligns with the school's long-term educational goals. Greater transparency and inclusive communication practices would likely mitigate dissatisfaction and strengthen trust across the school community.

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