



**Leadership Approaches Adopted by District Officials and their
Effect on the Management of Schools – a Case Study of
Secondary Schools in KwaZulu-Natal**

by

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ABSTRACT

Districts officials have a central role in the educational sector as they are seen as intermediaries between the national and provincial education departments and local schools. Their leadership role encompasses enhancing school functionality by collaborating and providing support to schools. Additionally, their roles extend to being implementers of policies, developing and empowering SMTs and driving transformation within the district. District officials play a pivotal role in education, however, the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how their leadership is cascaded to school level is under-researched. Therefore, this study aims to explore the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and the effect of these approaches on the management of schools. The study covers the leadership approaches, the effect of these approaches on how schools are managed, and the required improvement of district officials' leadership to positively affect the management of schools. This study is underpinned by the Transformational Leadership Theory. This study utilises qualitative research and operates within the interpretivist paradigm, making use of case study research. Three secondary schools were identified in the iLembe District of KwaZulu-Natal. Purposive and convenience sampling was employed to select nine participants comprising of three principals and six Departmental Heads. Data was generated through semi-structured interviews. Both the inductive and deductive approach to data analysis was used. The findings showed that district officials adopt various leadership approaches inclusive of policy-driven, instructional, supportive, and collaborative leadership approaches, which affects the work of school management. The findings further revealed that the leadership approaches utilised by district officials enhance accountability, discipline, instruction, capacity building and communication in schools. To strengthen district leadership, it was revealed that districts need to establish better support systems, develop, and enhance human relation skills and respond to specific school contexts. Overall, the study highlights the significant influence district officials have on SMTs and school operations. The insights gained may assist district officials in reflecting on and refining their leadership practices to contribute to school management and the broader education system more positively.

Key words: District Office, District Officials, School Leadership, School Management, Leadership Approaches, School Improvement

LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS

DH	Departmental Head
SMT	School Management Team
DP	Deputy Principal
DBE	Department of Basic Education
CM	Circuit Manager
ACESLM	Advanced Certificate in Education in School Leadership and Management
PLC	Professional Learning Community
CES	Chief Education Specialist
DCES	Deputy Chief Education Specialist
GET	General Education and Training
FET	Further Education and Training
IDSO	Institutional Development Support Officer
LftM	Lead from the Middle

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CHAPTER 1: ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

Effective leadership is a requisite for school effectiveness. It is through leadership that schools can achieve their envisaged goals (Balyer, 2012; Day et al., 2020; Givens, 2008; Marks & Printy, 2003). One of the most essential aspects in making schools succeed is by ensuring that there is effective leadership from all structural levels of education (schools, circuits, districts, and province) (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016; Republic of South Africa [RSA], 2012). District-level leadership plays a significant role in enhancing the capabilities of leaders within schools (Tingle et al., 2019). In this study, I use the case study approach to explore district officials' leadership approaches and how such approaches affect the management of schools. Given the aim of this study, in this chapter I present the background, problem statement, rationale, purpose and research questions. In addition, the most important concepts will be explored. Lastly, the organisation of the chapters will be articulated.

1.2 Background to the Study

Education is a basic right that all citizens possess, and it is a major driving force of the country's success (Shavkidinova et al., 2023). For education to be permeated to all facets of society, effective leadership is required (Guthey et al., 2018; Tabrizi & Rideout, 2019). Researchers maintain that leadership has the power to steer the direction of education in the country and has the potential to advance or stagnate the potential of schools (Daniëls et al., 2023; Fullan, 2009; Grissom et al., 2021b; Moldoveanu & Narayandas, 2019; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010).

Leadership should occur at all levels within the education fraternity (Connolly et al., 2019; Daniëls et al., 2023; Lumby, 2019). It begins with leaders in national and provincial Departments of Education, who are responsible for overseeing the development of curriculum and infrastructure, the implementation of policies and the distribution of resources (Bantwini, 2018; Christie et al., 2010; Harris & Jones, 2019; RSA, 2012). It then descends to districts who provide a supportive function to schools. It then penetrates the school level where the principal and SMT lead and direct the activities of the school, and Departmental Heads (DHs) lead their respective departments. It culminates in the classroom with the teacher leading his or her learners. Albeit districts are centralised in education, they have a critical leadership role to play

to ensure that schools are functional, and they achieve their educational objectives (Bantwini, 2015; DBE, 2013; Leithwood et al., 2014; Myende, et al., 2022). While the leadership at a district level is critical for school functionality, and how leadership and management take place at the school level, the role of districts and their effect on school management remains elusive in nature and needs to gain greater prominence (Bantwini 2018; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis 2010; Decman et al. 2018).

When schools and districts work in harmony, learner performance increases (Bantwini 2018; Chrispeels et al., 2008; Shannon & Bylsma, 2004). Leaders are instrumental in creating opportunities for learners to increase their achievement, and by extension, schools are equipped to develop and thrive (Harris & Jones, 2019; Kools & Stoll, 2016). Additionally, school leaders work with districts to develop and manage educational programmes, monitor lesson delivery and learner performance (Anderson & Young, 2018; Döş & Savaş, 2015). Leaders who can successfully manage teaching, learning and school administration are able to create effective schools (Daniëls et al., 2023). Their commitment enables transformation through the various spheres within the school (Harris & Jones, 2019).

District offices serve as an intermediary between provincial departments of education and schools (RSA, 2012). They are mandated to plan for schools within the district and serve as a point of information and contact for schools (RSA, 2012). Partnerships are created between district offices and schools to ensure that schools are aligned with the goals of the district (Anderson & Young, 2018; Hallinger, 2018). This ensures that all schools work collaboratively with districts to achieve common goals and to bridge achievement gaps in schools (Anderson & Young, 2018). Having district offices as a supportive structure can aid the development and enhancement of goals in schools. Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) state that the “real work” in education occurs at district level.

Furthermore, district officials have a significant impact on ensuring that learners receive education of a high quality by providing support and leading stakeholders within the school (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). Daniëls et al. (2023) outline that the foremost characteristic of effective schools is the emphasis leaders place on curriculum and lesson delivery. For this purpose, districts are responsible for monitoring, evaluating, and holding schools accountable to ensure that suitable learning environments are created, and quality learning takes place (RSA, 2012; National Planning Commission, 2012). One prominent way through which

districts support schools is by conducting school and classroom visits, and by meeting with role-players (RSA, 2012). Through the joint efforts of districts, teachers, principals and SMTs, schools are supported better, enabling them to adopt effective management approaches.

District leadership directly influences school leadership and management to ensure that quality education is received (Honingh & Hooge, 2014). Districts serve as a conduit between government and schools, by ensuring that policies from national and provincial levels are implemented at school level (Bantwini, 2015; Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Tingle et al., 2019). Furthermore, districts recognise the need for developing and training by providing professional development to both principals and teachers and offers guidance, direction, and accountability to ensure that schools move forward (Bush & Glover, 2014). Moreover, district officials are responsible for resource allocation to schools, which includes the distribution of funds, human resources, and educational material, which affects school management. By working closely with schools, districts understand the needs of individual schools to ensure that schools receive the support that they require (Anderson & Young, 2018).

District offices are a vital nerve centre that ensures the functioning of the system (Bantwini, 2018; Govender, 2018; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016), which can increase the abilities and confidence of school leaders, improving the functionality of schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010) and aiding learners to achieve more (Christie et al., 2010). Therefore, for schools to operate optimally, the school management, teachers and districts officials should ideally have a close working relationship.

Districts can be deemed supportive when they empower schools by granting them more autonomy over the control of how schools are managed (Ugarte et al., 2020). The support from districts is particularly significant when districts work collaboratively with schools to set goals, this exercise ensures that there is a shared consensus towards school and academic improvement (Rorrer et al. 2008; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Therefore, the principal concern of districts is to support curriculum delivery in schools by enhancing leadership and management practices, which will ultimately ensure that quality education is imparted to learners (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2016). Furthermore, Roberts (2011) highlights five primary functions of district officials to ensure their responsibilities are fulfilled, this includes: implementing policies; driving transformation through leadership and management; creating a conducive environment for the school to function as effectively as possible and supplying

professional and administrative assistance. In turn, districts hold schools accountable for their performance, which promotes stronger management and leadership practices within schools, and this fosters positive working relationships between schools and districts (RSA, 2012; Waters & Marzano, 2006). Honig and Rainey (2015) postulate that goals can be achieved when the single elements of the system (schools and districts) work in tandem with each other, as compared to working in isolation.

Previously, district officials were considered as hindrances to school improvement (Elmore, 1993; Smith & O' Day, 1990). In the South African context, they were considered as a “weak link” in rendering support to schools in the form of inadequate implementation of policy and affecting learner improvement and were mainly seen as units for compliance. Consequently, more attention was given to school management, as they focused on teaching and learning (Elmore, 1993; Smith & O' Day, 1990). Against this background, many SMT members view the role of districts in a negative light. It is therefore imperative to explore the role of districts and how this middle-level leadership is received by school-level leadership.

1.3 Rationale for the study

This study is born from concern about how district officials lead and how this leadership is experienced in secondary schools. Although district officials are carefully positioned as their structures can contribute to school improvement and development of personnel under their guidance, literature suggests that at times, district officials can be viewed as unsupportive, disruptive, and concerned with compliance. This brings to the fore an important question about the nature of the leadership of district officials and their influence on school leadership and management.

The Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (RSA, 2012) highlights that district offices are viewed as intermediaries between schools and the provincial education department. According to the policy (RSA, 2012), districts are mandated to support, monitor, collaborate and enhance teaching and learning. This suggests that the role of district officials should extend beyond supporting schools based on accountability and compliance and rather focus on capacity-building in SMTs. However, the outcomes suggested in policy is not always consistent with what happens at schools.

This observance exposes a gap in the literature. On the one hand, district leadership is viewed as important contributors to school improvement through their provision of guidance and

support, specifically in reinforcing management practices. However, in the South African context, schools experience district leadership as hierarchical, following top-down leadership tendencies, with a focus on compliance instead of capacity-building and collaboration (Bantwini, 2015; Bhayo et al., 2018; Cibane, 2020; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). This exposes a gap between monitoring for accountability and leadership for development.

Although monitoring and accountability are vital functions of district officials, they do not exclusively improve schools. Instead, coupling monitoring and accountability with empowerment and capacity building can yield positive results for SMTs and schools. When district officials employ a compliance and control approach, it may contribute to SMTs experiencing distrust, increased pressure, and limited collaboration. Contrastingly, when district officials are supportive and empowering, school leadership and management is improved.

This study is also a result of my experience within secondary schools where district officials visits to school were met with tension and pressure among teachers and SMTs. Colleagues have expressed their concerns that when district officials visit schools, they come to conduct inspections and issue directives, which can be burdensome. Although these expressions are anecdotal, closer examination is required on how district leadership is experienced at school level.

While literature exists on the significance of district leadership, it is limited on how SMTs experience various leadership approaches and how these approaches affect school leadership and management. Literature is insufficient in shedding light on balancing accountability-related monitoring and leadership centred around building capacity. Furthermore, literature is limited on how power and collaboration affect such relationships, which this study attempts to fill.

Therefore, this study attempts to explore how the leadership of district officials is experienced by SMTs and how this leadership affects school leadership and management. This study may contribute to an improved understanding of which leadership approaches are enabling, which are prohibiting and how the relationship between schools and districts can be improved to contribute to school improvement.

1.4 Problem statement

There is a dire need to improve the quality of teaching and learning (Clercq, 2020; Walker et al., 2019). District offices are expected to play a pivotal role in this process by providing support to schools, maintaining effective curriculum delivery while improving leadership and management practices within schools (RSA, 2012). There has been much contention on which leadership approaches fosters learning and improvement in schools, especially amongst district officials and schools, whose collaboration is critical in the education fraternity (Al Khajeh, 2018; Cheng, 2022; Cibane, 2020; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Additionally, literature suggests that the relationships between schools and districts are not always supportive. Some studies suggest that the breakdown or dysfunctionality of this collaboration is due to district officials showing tendencies of adopting a top-down leadership approach and that leadership that develops and empowers SMTs are not prevalent (Bantwini, 2015; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010). This may cause a hindrance to the SMT and teachers, which inevitably affects how schools are managed.

While there is sufficient literature on collaboration and school improvement, the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how their leadership is cascaded to school level remain limited, especially in the South African context (Bhayo et al., 2018, Cibane, 2020). This suggests that a gap exists as district leadership is perceived as compliance-driven and controlling rather than supportive and developmental. This perception may erode the effectiveness of SMTs, weaken teacher morale and undermine the effectiveness of other leadership approaches. If this problem remains inadequately explored, districts may continue practicing traditional leadership methods centred around compliance and accountability, without effectively supporting SMTs to improve their schools. Hence, this study seeks to contribute to the current body of literature by illuminating how district officials' leadership approaches are experienced by SMTs, how these approaches influence school leadership and management and how these leadership approaches can be improved.

1.5 Aim of the Study

This study aims to explore the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and the effect of these approaches on the management of schools. The study covers the leadership approaches, the effect of these approaches on how schools are managed, and lastly, the required improvement of district officials' leadership to positively affect the management of schools.

1.6 Research Questions

1. How do principals and SMT members perceive the leadership approaches adopted by district officials when working with schools?
2. How do district officials' leadership approaches, as experienced by SMT members, affect school management?
3. How can district officials' leadership approaches be strengthened, based on SMT members' experiences, to positively influence school management?

1.7 Clarification of Key Concepts

This study has several key concepts which are critical to be clarified to show how they will be used in the entire dissertation. These concepts are articulated as follows:

1.7.1 District Office

A district office is a local government entity which bridges the national and provincial Departments of Education and schools (RSA, 2012). Districts carry out instructions that are set by national and provincial levels (Mavuso, 2013). They work in tandem with principals and teachers by offering both pedagogical and management support to ensure that quality learning and teaching takes place (Lugaz & de Grauwe, 2010; RSA, 2012). The *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) mandates districts to plan, support, oversee and hold schools accountable. This study views district offices to be intermediaries between provincial education departments and schools and that these offices are responsible for overseeing schools within the district. Districts have further units called circuit offices (RSA, 2012).

1.7.2 District Officials

District officials are personnel who are located as intermediaries between provincial departments of education and schools (RSA, 2012). They work closely with principals and teachers to improve teaching and learning by providing support to school management and teachers (RSA, 2012). Additionally, they implement government policies and ensure accountability of relevant role-players. District officials oversee the management of resources and provide targeted support according to the school's needs, at the same time, aligning schools to the goals envisaged by the district (Fullan, 2009; Hightower, 2002).

Officials who work at the district office include the District Director, Chief Education Specialists (CES), the Circuit Manager, CES for Curriculum Support, Learning and Implementation for the General Education and Training (GET) and Further Education and Training (FET) bands. This is followed by the Deputy Chief Education Specialist (DCES), Institutional Development Support Officer (IDSO) for Curriculum Support in the GET and FET bands (Cibane, 2020). This study centres around the District Management Team who monitor and provide support for teaching and learning to schools within the district. The crucial role-players include the District Director, CES and DCES for curriculum support (Cibane, 2020). In this study, district officials are viewed as middle-level management who provide guidance and support to schools and hold schools accountable.

1.7.3 School Leadership

Leithwood et al. (2010) contend that educational leaders provide a clear vision in terms of improving learner achievement whilst creating a conducive environment for teaching and learning. Hallinger (2010) adds that providing professional development to the relevant stakeholders and advocating a culture of learning are essential practices for educational leaders. Fullan's (2009) definition of educational leadership highlights the need for school leaders to improve schools by bringing out positive changes to the school environment. Leithwood et al. (2010) states that educational leadership is a process that influences and provides guidance to personnel in educational institutions to achieve common goals associated with learner achievement and school improvement.

Leadership at school level typically consists of the school principals, deputy principals and departmental heads who are responsible for raising standards (Day et al., 2020; Hopkins, MacBeath & Chapman, 2023; Leithwood et al., 2019). Additionally, leaders at school level develop and represent the values of the school by promoting teaching and learning, providing staff with opportunities for development, managing resources and engaging with the external community, at the same time, providing support to learners and ensuring their well-being (Day et al., 2020). In this study, school leadership comprises of people in positions of authority who can influence others towards achieving the goals of the school.

1.7.3 School Management

School management is associated with creating an environment which promotes teaching and learning through strategically allocating resources, maintaining finances, ensuring the school

has sufficient human resources and ensuring the school operates effectively (Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Honig, 2010). Furthermore, areas such as learner discipline, absenteeism, learner safety, learner uniform and classroom management are monitored by school managers (Cibane, 2020). School management consists of a central authority, usually comprising of the principal, teachers, parents, and learners who collaboratively make decisions involving the daily operations of the school (Caldwell & Spinks, 2021; Cheng, 2022). Their aim is to maximise the use of the school's resources to enhance efficiency, effectiveness, and promote the quality of education received by learners (Cheng, 2022). Additionally, decision-making, overseeing and maintaining resources, both human and material, financial aspects, curriculum support, buildings, facilities, and equipment are intertwined in some of the tasks of school management (Caldwell & Spinks, 2021). Consequently, Farah (2013) emphasises that school management comprises of a continuous process of planning, organising, directing, controlling, and assessing the success of all actions taken. In this study, school management refers to people in decision-making roles who are involved in the planning, organising, leading, and controlling processes to meet the goals of the school by ensuring the school operates smoothly and effectively.

1.7.4 Leadership Approaches

Leadership approaches can be attributed to the way in which people are influenced by the leader to achieve the goals of an organisation (Al Khajeh, 2018; Sousa & Rocha, 2019). Adopting a particular leadership approach involves the leader using a blend of individual characteristics and qualities when engaging with others (Mitonga-Monga & Coetzee, 2012). This approach determines the leader's ability to guide and inspire, at the same time, the receptiveness of individuals in executing the leader's vision (Dansereau et al.; 2013). In the field of education, leadership approaches have a strong influence on teaching and learning (Robinson, 2007). Notably, effective leaders provide support to role-players with the aim of improving their abilities to reach their full potentials (Bush & Glover, 2014; Iqbal et al., 2015). Given the diversity of existing leadership approaches, leaders should carefully select the approach that would be best suited to a particular setting (Iqbal et al., 2015). In this study, leadership approaches refer to the different techniques adopted by leaders to influence others.

1.7.5 School Improvement

School improvement is a process focused on adapting practices and policies to enhance the quality of educational institutions (Creemers & Reezigt, 2005; Schildkamp, 2019). Fullan (2009) states that school improvement occurs in three ways: firstly, increasing the knowledge

and promoting pedagogical development of staff, emphasising collaboration by migrating from individual to shared activities and lastly, providing of school-wide support to improve teaching. This is done with the aim of increasing learner performance by creating conducive conditions in which this can be achieved (Day et al., 2020). A conducive environment allows learners to inculcate positive values, develop a culture of continuous learning and imbibing personal, social, and economic skills (Day et al., 2020). Goal setting is an integral part of educating to ensure that schools are continuously improving (Schildkamp, 2019). The above-mentioned factors should be pooled by supportive leaders who encourage staff and learners to drive positive change within schools (Day, 2009; Pino Yancovic et al., 2019). In this study, school improvement refers to the process of elevating the practices within schools to increase the effectiveness and quality within the school.

1.8 Organisation of the Study

This dissertation consists of five chapters. The following is an overview of each chapter:

Chapter one comprises of the introduction and background to this study. Thereafter, the rationale elucidates on the motive for pursuing this study, as well as the contribution this study will make to the existing literature. Following this, the problem statement, aim, and research questions were articulated. Finally, the fundamental concepts associated with this study were explained.

Chapter two is composed of a review of existing literature related to this research. The work from both national and international researchers will be used to explain leadership of district officials, how their leadership affects the operations within the school and strategies emanating from literature on how districts can improve their leadership. Lastly, the chapter discusses the theoretical framework that underpins this study.

Chapter three contains the research design and methodology that forms the basis of this study. The research paradigm and research approach will first be clarified. Thereafter, participant selection, data generation and analysis will be discussed, a case study database will be built using data collected from participants. Then, codes will be developed. Categorical aggregation will be used (Yin, 2009 & Stake, 1995), following an exploration of similarities and differences between the cases and finally, generalisations will be drawn. Lastly, limitations, issues surrounding trustworthiness and ethical considerations will be expounded on.

Chapter four uses the data that was generated to analyse and discuss the findings of this study. **Chapter five** consists of a summary of the study. Thereafter, the conclusion and recommendations are presented.

1.9 Chapter Summary

The aim of this chapter was to pique the interest of the reader in relation to the leadership approaches adopted by district officials. Firstly, the introduction espoused that effective leadership is required from all structural levels to ensure that schools develop. Secondly, the background explained that schools and districts should work collaboratively to increase performance. Thereafter, the rationale described my experience, which consisted of varying interpretations of how district leadership was perceived by my superiors that has led to an interest in this topic. However, literature indicated that district officials provide a supportive role to enhance schools. The problem statement then highlighted the need for education to improve and that leadership approaches can determine the school success. This is important as there are some instances where the synergy between schools and districts have been dysfunctional. This was followed by the aim of this study and the research questions, and lastly, the vital concepts were discussed.

In the next chapter, a literature review related to this research is presented. The literature review draws on work from national and international scholars. Lastly, the theoretical framework that underpins this study will be discussed.

CHAPTER 2: REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

The previous chapter laid the groundwork for this study where the introduction, background, rationale, problem statement, aim and keywords were articulated. This chapter is composed of a review of existing literature related to this research. Therefore, I investigate the work from both national and international scholars which will be used to explain the leadership of district officials and its effect of how schools are managed. The aim of this chapter to understand the research relevant to the leadership approaches adopted by district officials, simultaneously identifying gaps that the current body of knowledge may present. Lastly, the chapter will discuss the theoretical framework that underpins this study. First, I present an overview of education districts. Then, I interrogate current leadership approaches that are used in the education sector. I also examine the impact of these leadership approaches on school management. Next, I assess the strategies for improvement of district leadership. Last, I present the theoretical framework that is used this study. This review shows that although district leadership is critical, little is known about how leadership approaches of district officials affect school management directly, particularly in secondary schools.

2.2 School Leadership and School Management

Both leadership and management are important in education but have different purposes. Leithwood et al. (2020) informs that educational leadership is a process that influences and guides people in educational institutions to achieve common goals associated with learner achievement and school improvement. Communication and encouragement to work for the betterment of the organisation is emphasised (Mehta et al., 2022; Shah, 2023). Day et al. (2020) and Maponya (2020) contend that educational leadership requires a clear vision to improve learner achievement and schools. Kilag et al. (2023) adds that leadership encompasses professional development. This contrasts with management, which is more regulatory and steers the direction of the school by putting in place processes and procedures to achieve the school's goals (Hamidifar et al., 2023; Shah, 2023). It is associated with creating an environment which promotes teaching and learning through strategically allocating resources, maintaining finances and human resources (Bush, 2020; Caldwell & Spinks, 2021; Shah, 2023). Areas such as learner discipline, absenteeism, learner safety, learner uniforms and classroom management are be monitored by school managers (Cibane, 2020).

While school leaders are expected to have a vision, inspire and lead school improvement, they are often met with a different reality, which is one that is marked by resource constraints and administrative and compliance demands. This presents a tension between how leadership is idealised compared to the realities that affect their management processes, which can limit the extent to which they practice transformational leadership. This study focuses on school management as it is becoming increasingly difficult for SMTs to execute their duties amidst the inconsistent leadership approaches adopted by district officials, coupled with resource limitations, that severely affects schools. School management is vital because it is a yardstick of the practicality of leadership (Bush & Glover, 2014; Maphalala, Govender & Khumalo, 2023; Vorontsova & Dakari, 2024). However, the work of SMTs often go unnoticed (Zaman, 2024). It is thus imperative that leadership at the district level work hand in hand with school management structures to allow schools to move forward.

2.3 Overview of Education Districts in South Africa – Past and Present Perspectives

During apartheid, education in South Africa was racially segregated (Schoeman, 2004). Nineteen education departments were instituted to serve the needs of the apartheid government (Mavuso, 2013). At the time, no formal local education structures existed, prompting the Education Affairs Act of 1988, which introduced regional and circuit offices. Regional offices served administrative functions as extensions of the central office (Anderson, 2003; Behr, 1988; Fullan, 2009), while circuit offices controlled schools, fostering fear and hostility (Mavuso, 2013; Narsee, 2006).

Fleisch (2006) described this period as the first wave of education reform evidenced by small-scale, teacher-led initiatives before 1990, which failed to address systemic issues. After 1994, education became more inclusive and democratic, resulting in education reforms (Mavuso, 2013). Provincial education departments were created, led by the national department of education, and district offices were introduced to improve teaching and learning and support schools (Mohlala, 2007). This led to the second wave in Fleisch's (2006) approach which promoted bottom-up change through improved school culture and planning, although these efforts did not significantly impact on learner achievement (Christie et al., 2007; Fleisch, 2006).

Presently, district offices manage different portfolios such as school management and policy implementation, others prioritise professional development, some are concerned with making district offices resource centres and others combine all these functions (Mavuso, 2013).

Transformation of learning and teaching remains uniform across all districts. This culminates in the last wave of Fleish's (2006) three-wave approach, which focused on the efforts of districts and their contribution to improvement across schools, which is still prevalent and practiced today.

What emerges is that Fleish's (2006) model was not always successful in advancing school reform. This was predominantly due to the inconsistent support and implementation that reform initiatives received, coupled with inadequate capacity at district level. The first wave was limited as reforms were mainly teacher led. Although the second wave made a significant contribution by promoting inclusivity in schools by promoting the school culture and planning, the education fraternity still grappled with inadequate capacity as limited and uneven support from districts reached schools districts, which had minimal impact on improving learner achievement. In contrast, the third wave places districts at the forefront of educational reform by making them responsible for school improvements while navigating limited capacity and bureaucratic demands.

2.4 Functions of District Officials – Policy Perspective

Following the democratic dispensation, the Department of Basic Education developed a *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), which outlines the functions of district officials, and how their roles can support schools. Districts are legal entities that are instructed by the national department of education to provide quality education to learners (Naicker et al., 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2015). Their centrality enables them to support curriculum delivery and ensure that learners receive quality education. Kaufmann et al. (2012) places the responsibility of districts stating that district officials are in a crucial position to drive medium to large school improvement. Cibane (2020) adds that to fulfil this responsibility, they should possess the required skills to mitigate this task.

The *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) therefore outlines the following three essential roles that district officials must play to execute their tasks effectively:

2.4.1 Planning

District offices begin their work by gathering data from schools, circuits, and the district, which informs their planning for the district. This process assists schools by helping them

to develop improvement and development plans. Thereafter, these plans are integrated into the district plan (RSA, 2012). Planning cannot occur in the absence of leadership (Cibane, 2020). For the planning process to benefit all structures in the system, there must be effective communication across the different levels (Cibane, 2020).

2.4.2 Support

Following the planning process, districts can provide targeted support in accordance with the needs of schools, aligned to policies and law. Districts try to improve teaching and learning in schools by visiting schools, conducting classroom observations, consulting with various stakeholders, meeting with clusters and providing support (RSA, 2012). Districts also serve as an important source of information pertaining to administrative, policy and law related matters (RSA, 2012). Another way in which district offices offer support is by capacitating SMTs and teachers through developmental programmes. (RSA, 2012).

2.4.3 Oversight and Accountability

Following the support that district offices render to schools, they then hold principals accountable for the performance of learners. Local district offices then account to the provincial department of education for the schools under their jurisdiction, which is done in accordance with the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012). Oversight and accountability, together with the development of SMT go hand in hand to ensure schools improve and that quality education is imparted (DBE, 2013; Mestry, 2017).

While policy visibly outlines the roles and responsibilities of district officials (RSA, 2012), their ability to fulfil these roles may not always be possible. Spillane (2009) argues that sometimes district officials do not fully understand policies regarding school reforms and the vision of the national department of education and this makes it difficult for them to implement such reforms and vision. Additionally, their responsibilities may be time contingent, lacking adequate training and resources. This could be detrimental to schools who may not receive adequate support from district officials in this regard and could stifle the process of school improvement. Therefore, this study endeavours to shed light on the leadership approaches of district officials and the effect it has on school management, with a focus on district officials' leadership approaches; how their leadership approaches affect school management and how their leadership approaches can be improved.

2.5 Current Leadership Approaches and their Impact on Management

The following sections comprise of findings from literature on leadership approaches that are adopted in contemporary times. Taken together, the literature shows that no single leadership approach is isolated. Instead, district officials traverse between approaches.

2.5.1 Autocratic Leadership

Autocratic leadership is viewed as leaders making all the decisions for the organisation (Adyemi, 2013) and followers are expected to comply with the decisions made (Khan et al., 2015). Bodla and Nawaz (2010) found that autocratic leadership is characterised by central authority and decision-making where working methods are dictated, and follower participation is limited. Autocratic leadership limits the autonomy that SMTs have by being compliance-driven and making decisions at a central level that affect schools, without considering specific needs. Additionally, SMTs cannot enact context-specific and strategic leadership as they are viewed as implementers of decisions made by a central authority. These factors increase the workload and stress of SMTs and teachers who now prioritise administration and meeting compliance requirements instead of supporting and improving learner achievement and the school. The research presented in this section is organised in accordance with the features of the autocratic leadership approach, which encompasses centralised decision-making and compliance, bureaucracy and the impact of support and stakeholder involvement and professional empowerment within autocratic leadership.

2.5.1.1 Centralised Decision-Making and Compliance

Hierarchical structures are still prevalent within educational institutions and principals highlight the need to be included in decision-making processes and not to be forced into compliance without consultation. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) contributed to vital literature in the domain of district leadership in South Africa. Their study investigated principals' perspectives on the nature of support received from districts in conducting their work and how this can be enhanced, was conducted amongst 18 principals from primary and secondary schools of five Eastern Cape districts and data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Principals indicated that they wanted to be involved in district decision-making, suggesting that decisions concerning their schools were made by higher structures. Furthermore, principals indicated that when district officials attend meetings with higher structures alone, they are mandated to ensure that schools comply. This resulted in principals being seen as "passive instruction takers." Principals claimed that district officials had no

power and were seen as “middlemen” who did the province’s bidding, suggesting that province has centralised power. Bantwini (2015) therefore calls for a change from the existing “command-and-control” leadership style to a more collaborative leadership approach.

On the other hand, Circuit Managers (CMs), a component of district offices are responsible for planning, managing, supporting, and improving teaching and learning in schools, ensuring that schools comply with policy implementation, they also provide leadership guidance to SMTs (Childress et al., 2020). Research stipulates that the more CMs concern themselves with enforcing compliance, the more rigid they are in morphing into other roles (Steyn & Fuller, 2024). Many CMs claimed that the district and province expected them to expand their roles, which were not aligned to their job descriptions, they indicated that their expanded roles were time-consuming, and they were not able to effectively assist schools. This has worsened since COVID-19, and principals have indicated that they did not receive the required assistance from districts (and circuits) to necessitate changes to adapt to COVID-19 (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Koko, 2020; McDonald, 2020). CMs reported feeling overwhelmed and overburdened when working with principals (Ndlovu, 2018; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). CMs are now compelled by the Department of Basic Education (DBE) to shoulder more responsibilities and manage expectations, taking responsibility of more schools - many of which they are untrained to oversee (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014). Due to the expanding workload of CMs, CMs and principals have had to make decisions on what to prioritise in schools. (Ehren et al., 2020; Howard et al., 2019). The tension arises when CMs and principals begin to feel overburdened and overwhelmed as leadership becomes more centred on compliance and control.

2.5.1.2 Bureaucratic Leadership and Support

Autocratic leadership has strong ties with bureaucracy where support is filtered through a structure. In one study, principals expressed their dissatisfaction with the support received from their districts in terms of providing resources, professional development, and the lack of district-school relationships, especially since principals were not included in decision-making processes (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). Some principals were compelled to carry a full teaching load, leaving minimal time to manage the school. This is attributed to the limited supply of teachers. Principals echoed that the number of teachers employed at schools is a cause for concern as it significantly affects school management. Nwafor and Ololube (2024) inform that bureaucratic leadership is linked to limited flexibility and unwillingness to change. However, it

is noted that district officials do have vision and goals, but due to wider systemic challenges, these goals become difficult to be achieved.

The findings from the studies conducted by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) and Steyn and Fuller (2024) do not align with that of international studies conducted by Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010), Honig (2012) and Leithwood (2010), which articulates the need for districts to provide opportunities for consultation to offer their support. It, however, does align to local findings which suggests that districts are “bureaucratic and unsupportive” (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Bantwini (2018) argues that district officials are victims of top-down leadership and not are not culprits of this culture, suggesting that school improvement and effective management practices can only be achieved if top-down and bottom-up leadership is used as a combination.

Steyn and Fuller (2024) conducted a study to understand the roles and responsibilities of CMs who are components of districts. The study was conducted in two education districts in the Gauteng province and comprised of 17 participants, which consisted of CMs and principals. Data was collected through individual semi-structured interviews. In this study, principals shared that they were not well supported by CMs, especially when their schools’ lacked resources. Additionally, principals noted that teachers were overburdened and could not adequately cater for more learners while providing quality education. This finding arose after the COVID-19 pandemic (RSA, 2012; Morrison, 2013; Mouton, et al., 2012; Wallace Foundation, 2013; Gabster et al., 2020; McDonald, 2020). Without adequate support from districts, principals struggle to execute leadership and management within their schools. This is exacerbated by resource limitations, excessive administrative functions, and political influences. Principals who are not adequately supported in their roles, struggle to manage schools well.

Moreover, CMs and principals experience a tremendous amount of anxiety, frustration, and stress, but it can be argued that this is not new in South Africa or globally (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Childress et al., 2020; Howard et al. 2019; McDonald, 2020). Additionally, researchers argue that CMs do not receive support from districts, neither do they have adequate resources to support the work that they do (Bantwini & Moroosi, 2018; Chingara, 2019). For this reason, the National Planning Commission (NPC) iterated that districts are unable to transform the education system of the country and are seen as a “weak link” in providing education (DBE, 2021; HRDC, 2014; Narsee, 2006). Participants shared that for their schools to perform

optimally, they needed support from all spheres in the education system: district, provincial, national. Furthermore, without guidance from these spheres, the work of CMs become increasingly challenging as principals require constant support in the face of emerging challenges.

In an earlier study conducted by Bantwini (2015), it was evidenced that teachers did not receive the required support from their districts, and this severely impacted on policy implementation in schools. The lack of support negatively impacted on teacher development and district-school collaboration. However, participants from the Steyn and Fuller study (2024) valued the support of CMs because they have knowledge of how schools' function and "how principals learn" to bring about school-wide changes (Honig & Rainey, 2019). Therefore, providing clear direction needs to become the norm so principals can cope with changes (Honig & Rainey, 2019). Deming (2018) indicated that school inspections are important to correct weaknesses, however, inspections to improve quality of teaching and learning should be stopped. The emphasis should rather be on improving school management processes to improve quality.

Policy mandates that CMs are responsible for school leadership and management (RSA, 2012). Deming (2018) informs that compliance consists of the provision of support rather than holding people accountable. Findings also suggest that having a shared mission and vision across the district and province, is the responsibility of the CM. Bush and Glover (2016) argue that school leadership is about "persuasion" to bring about changes in education but in order for leaders to achieve successful schools and provide support to stakeholders, all stakeholders need to interact (Hussain et al., 2018). Tournier et al. (2023) is of the view that CMs and districts can drive system-wide improvement when they lead from the middle, but whether they are sufficiently equipped to do so remains a challenge.

2.5.1.3 Stakeholder Involvement and Professional Empowerment

From the study conducted by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), there is a growing need for the focus to be shifted from "principals as organisational managers" to "leaders of learning" (Hallinger & Ko, 2015). Branch et al. (2012) are of the view that effective principals (and SMTs) are the cornerstones to effective schools. Participants from the Steyn and Fuller (2024) study shared that they found it beneficial when schools collaborated to share ideas on how to improve their schools. They also indicated that when they engaged with school leaders, they were empowered to deal with novel challenges that affected their schools.

Despite the influence of financial constraints, political interference, demands from the Department of Education, CMs are still being held responsible for school performance, whether district support is present or not (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Mafuwane & Pitsoe, 2014). It is important to note that many CMs occupy their positions because of “cadre deployment” (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Kotze, 2023). Research reveals that CMs cannot effectively support principals because they do not have principal, leadership or management experience and the necessary knowledge and skills for this role (Ndlovu, 2018; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016).

The Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts (RSA, 2012) outlines the roles and responsibilities of district officials. However, there are far more that they do (Chingara, 2019; Myende et al., 2022). They are responsible for ensuring that principals are adequately supported by other sections in the district and providing necessary resources in their different contexts. Research argues that district officials do not visit schools regularly, and when they do, their visits are inadequate in providing support to principals (Bottery, 2016; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016; Heystek, 2016). While principals continuously become overburdened, it is becoming increasingly challenging for districts to support them (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Björk et al, 2014; Diko et al., 2011). It is important that when schools undergo change, people understand the relationships that need to be forged to ensure that change occurs sustainably. However, a key drawback from autocratic and bureaucratic leadership approaches is that leaders enforce accountability ahead to building capacity and providing support. The important takeaway is that schools cannot improve when they are not given adequate support and guidance.

2.5.2 Instructional Leadership

Instructional leadership is considered a cornerstone to all educational activities. Furthermore, this leadership approach is enshrined in the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), advocating the promotion of learning and teaching. The instructional leadership approach stands in contrast to the autocratic approach, which prioritises compliance and accountability. In this study, the focus is on district officials’ instructional leadership and its influence on SMTs. Although the literature presents the perspectives of principals and teachers, the focus is tied to how district officials shape teaching, learning and school management. The research presented in this section is organised in accordance with the features of the instructional leadership approach.

2.5.2.1 Focus on Teaching and Learning to Improve Learner Performance

Instructional leadership is commonly expanded at school level. This discussion is associated with how district officials practice instructional leadership as manifested through their guidance, monitoring and support to SMTs and teachers. The role of teachers and principals is elucidated and based on how district leadership is received and mediated in schools. Researchers view instructional leadership as the role that school leaders play in advancing teaching and learning by improving instructional practices in schools, to enable learners to perform optimally (Chuta, 2019; Fowler & Walter, 2020; Neumerski et al, 2018; Tedla & Redda, 2021). Districts are the most important point of support for school leaders and are transcending their traditional bureaucratic roles (De Clercq & Shalem, 2014; Narsee, 2006). Adopting an instructional leadership approach leads to sustainable learner performance as it is geared towards learning (Powell, 2017; Southworth, 2009). The *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) places districts at the forefront of effecting instructional leadership practices in schools, through the SMT (NEEDU, 2013).

Mthembu et al. (2020) examined the leadership of district officials in two districts in Gauteng. In-depth, face-to-face semi structured interviews were conducted with six executive district officials. It was found that instructional leadership is critical to improving learner performance (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2010) and that districts are well-positioned as middle management to ensure the effective delivery of curriculum in schools (Burch & Spillane, 2004; Childress et al., 2007). Similar findings were also reported by Marzano and Waters (2009) who conducted a meta-analysis amongst school districts in USA highlighting that when district officials executed their roles effectively, it had a positive impact on learner achievement (Shaked, 2023). These two nations are vastly different but agree on adopting instructional leadership to enhance learner performance.

Instructional leadership has moved to involving SMTs in improving teaching and learning (Shava et al., 2021). Dhanpat and Naicker (2024) extends the concept of instructional leadership suggesting that it can be operationalised at district level. Research has also uncovered that effective schools adopted an instructional leadership approach (Berkovich & Bogler, 2021; Leithwood, 2021; Pashiardis & Johansson, 2021). However, instructional leadership at school level is not isolated from district level. Rather, the decisions taken at district level are done with the aim of providing support at school level. Therefore, Leithwood (2021) argues that when district officials execute their instructional leadership capacities, challenges that SMTs face can

be eliminated, and the focus will be on teaching and learning.

2.5.2.2 Provision of Support

Additionally, instructional leadership includes school management aspects to ensure the school is run efficiently and effectively through suitable management processes (Cherkowski, 2016; Grissom & Loeb, 2011; Liebowitz & Porter, 2019). Shaked (2023) stated that instructional leaders should provide adequate resources to schools and be knowledgeable on aspects concerning teaching and learning. Proponents of instructional leadership manage their time and ensure resources are effectively used for learning purposes, while promoting teacher development (Shava et al., 2021). Additionally, the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) emphasises the role of districts in creating suitable learning environments in schools and ensuring that education of a high standard is delivered in schools by providing the necessary support. School management is not only a function of SMTs, but an important responsibility of district officials who are expected to reinforce the curriculum through the provision of support and development.

Dhanpat and Naicker (2024) investigated the district's role in strengthening principals' instructional leadership practices to improve educational outcomes through case study design. Ten principals and 14 district officials from primary and secondary schools from a school district in Gauteng were interviewed. It was found that district officials were unclear on their roles and responsibilities, which left principals unsupported. A similar finding was reported by Steyn and Fuller (2024) on their work of CMs. Principals indicated that teachers were provided with support in terms of content from the district but the provision of support for principals was taken for granted with the assumption that principals were aware of curriculum matters and the management thereof.

Mthembu et al. (2020) found that top-down and bottom-up leadership have become obsolete leadership approaches in the technologically complex era (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). Therefore, there is a growing need for district leaders to play a more practical role in supporting schools while driving district improvement (Hargreaves & Ainsow, 2015). As leaders who LftM (Lead from the Middle), they are better able to support schools at a local level and can develop actionable programmes to support schools (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Fullan, 2015). While the above-mentioned views are utopian in the South African context, district officials are not always empowered and adequately resourced to offer this support to schools.

Often, due to their LftM status, they impose directives on schools, while seeking endorsement of their work from the schools they lead, illustrating a top-down approach (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015). Middle level managers should develop a robust routine to analyse performance, planning, setting targets and monitoring classrooms (Botha, 2006; Bush & Glover, 2021).

Findings from the study by Mthembu et al. (2020) reveal that districts play a vital role in giving schools direction, especially regarding curriculum implementation. It is also revealed that district directors take responsibility for success achieved at schools and that district officials understand the responsibilities associated with their roles in supporting schools, more especially the impact of teaching and learning. While this study by Mthembu et al. (2020) offers some insight, more research is needed from other districts to provide a more holistic view.

In contrast, Ngcobo (2020) conducted a study amongst five teachers from two secondary schools in the Ugu District, KZN. The study was conducted to examine the roles that subject advisors played in supporting secondary school teaching and learning and data was collected through interviews. Participants shared that their subject advisors provided support, direction and capacitated them in the roles they played to improve teacher and learner performance by teaching effectively. Participants shared that subject advisors are reactive in their approach in helping teachers due to being overburdened and having too many schools to oversee. Hence, they paid particular attention to underperforming schools. Teachers shared that the workshops organised by their subject advisors assisted them in enhancing their content knowledge, which made them feel more confident (Zepeda, 2013). These findings emphasise that different districts in South Africa prioritise different aspects of education.

DuFour (2011) adds that instructional leaders are responsible for providing resources to ensure that schools are managed, and teaching and learning takes place, revealing a relationship between district officials and learner performance (Marzano & Waters, 2009). Additionally, Craig et al. (2023) note that schools do not have sufficient human resources to ensure that teaching and learning occurs. While it is not the purview of subject advisors to consult on HR (Human Resource) matters, they can expediate this process. While the study by Ngcobo (2020) focuses on the work of subject advisors and teachers, much insight can be derived from the work of subject advisors, who are a component of district offices, and how their leadership approaches affect schools. When the instructional leadership capacity of principals is

supported, it can lead to school enhancement with greater learner achievement (Day & Sammons, 2016).

2.5.2.3 Professional Development

Instructional leadership is viewed as the ability of school leaders i.e. districts and SMT to select specific “behaviours and practices” that should be implemented to encourage instructional development in teachers and SMT, which have contributed to improved learner performance (Hallinger, 2011). Additionally, Naicker (2014) notes that districts are largely administrative which neglects the development of principals in their instructional capacities. Fowler and Walter (2020) views instructional leadership as allowing stakeholders involved to grow in their professional capacities. Darling-Hammond et al. (2022) add that districts are responsible for developing school principals and SMT to have knowledge, skills, and attitudes to effectively carry out their functions. Therefore, Marzano and Waters (2009) call for districts to “strike a balance” between overseeing schools while empowering SMTs.

Knapp et al. (2014), Leithwood and Louis (2012); Louis et al. (2016) reiterated that to improve schools, there must be a culture of learning at all levels: leader learning, teacher learning and learner learning. According to LaDue (2021), the interconnection of instructional leadership and “leadership for learning” is vital to create a shared confidence in the ability to succeed. This shared confidence is necessary for SMTs and districts to bring about district-wide improvements. Additionally, instructional leaders provide opportunities for others to grow and learn (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). Yoon et al. (2008) adds that while professional development is important, there is a constant need to stay abreast of the latest developments and theories. Therefore, the role of district officials as coaches can yield positive results seeing that suggestions are personalised and integrated into teachers’ work.

Mestry (2017) notes that when districts prioritise the development of principals, which is cascaded down to teachers, results can be seen in learner performance. District officials also noted that principals are overworked and overburdened with having limited resources which affects the implementation of directives in schools. Furthermore, principals lacked management skills. Naicker (2014) added that it is difficult for district officials to develop and hone instructional leadership in principals when they themselves lack it. Other principals noted that they have positive interactions with district officials, citing that district officials monitor schools and provide feedback to principals. Others are hands-on, ensuring principals are

capacitated through meetings and workshops. Participants called for more visibility of district officials in schools to share good practices and have regular curriculum meetings.

From the Mthembu et al. (2020) study, a critical aspect of instructional leadership is that districts are at the helm of empowering and capacitating school leaders. Childress et al. (2007) further notes that middle leaders (district officials) work in layered and complicated environments that encompass larger organisational goals and objectives, and at the same time, they are required to navigate challenging school environments under their care. As middle leaders, they are positioned to be essential proponents of change (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Fullan, 2009). Furthermore, more collaboration between schools and districts are required (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Wei et al. (2023) urges for collaboration between districts and schools to improve management roles.

From the vantage point of CMs, Myende et al. (2022) conducted a study amongst six CMs in KZN to understand how CMs supported teaching and learning in deprived areas, and to understand why certain leadership practices were adopted. Data was generated by means of interviews and document reviews. It was found that some education department officials imposed their authority on structures lower down. All participants shared that they worked with schools to plan for the year ahead. They conducted workshops where SMTs and principals were instructed on how to effectively monitor curriculum delivery in their schools. Furthermore, they armed them with tools to monitor curriculum delivery and monitored how those tools were used in schools. It was found that over time, the role of CMs have transitioned from the traditional “school inspectors” to active instructional leaders (Roegman & Hatch, 2012). The leadership inherent in the participants focused on training, facilitating, and directing professional development initiatives (Saphier & Durkin, 2013).

The leadership from district officials ensures that schools align to the curriculum. There is enhancement in instruction and professional development opportunities are available. This creates a sense of synergy amongst school staff (Haslam, 2014). Additionally, there are two overarching characteristics to instructional leadership. The first considers the role of leaders in improving teaching and learning, and the second considers developing and strengthening the capabilities of others (Rorrer et al., 2008). This requires alignment and collaboration in district improvement initiatives (Rorrer et al., 2008). Moreover, instructional leadership can be strengthened when monitoring and accountability is combined with mentoring, feedback and

professional development opportunities.

2.5.2.4 Shared Vision and Collaboration

Halverson and Dikkers (2011) iterates that leaders should extend leadership to other stakeholders. Extending leadership to external stakeholders builds trust and increases the potential for collaboration (Khalifa, 2012). Myende and Chikoko (2014) agree that collaboration is especially important in deprived contexts as schools face numerous challenges which cannot be tackled solely by the SMT. De Vries and Korotov (2010) argue that leadership is no longer just about position and authority but about the ability of leaders to positively influence schools and the acknowledgement of multiple assets found amongst people and organisations (Chikoko et al., 2014; Myende, 2018). Shared vision and collaboration are important components of district leadership. These components can determine whether district officials are seen as partners or supervisors. This section focuses on how districts foster and maintain collaboration with school leaders.

CMs can be described as transforming, visionary leaders and are seen as centralised leadership with silos of knowledge, skills, and power to share with SMTs which can influence change in schools (Naidoo, 2021) However, they ignore the leadership skills of outside management structures. As transformative leaders, they should believe in the inclusion of others. Like the CMs in the study by Myende et al. (2022), leaders commit to building the capacity and motivation of all stakeholders (Naidoo, 2021) and they try to use the assets that others have. However, a CM stated that when district officials had their own programmes for schools, circuits had to abandon their programmes and go along with the district's programme. This can be viewed as district initiatives taking precedence and a lack of integration of district-circuit-school programmes, also a display of bureaucratic leadership.

Additionally, those occupying leadership positions, may not be adequately armed with leadership and management skills to execute their responsibilities (Myende, 2018). Therefore, they are required to utilise what they have available, sometimes extending beyond the school. Multiple stakeholder involvement is fostered by creating strong ties with the larger community and other local organisations. CMs took it upon themselves to capacitate certain school structures e.g., where SGB (School Governing Body) and RCLs (Representative Council of Learners) were found to be lacking, a participant (CM) provided the necessary training to them. This illustrates a symbiotic relationship where schools influence leadership and leadership

influences schools (Marishane, 2016).

In their findings, Myende et al. (2022) reported that CMs recognised the interconnections of the people where they worked. Because of that, their (CMs) leadership responded to the demands of the environment, referred to as the asset-based approach to leadership. The CMs leadership practices are inspired by their desire to support principals to achieve a sense of well-being and develop their leadership capabilities. While the study by Myende et al. (2022) provides insight into the role of CMs in resilient conditions, it is limited in the sense that the study only focuses on deprived contexts. To develop a more holistic view on the leadership phenomenon, more literature needs to be generated in a variety of educational contexts (Hallinger, 2011; Maringe & Moletsane, 2015).

Bhengu and Mkhize (2013) adds that instructional leadership gives schools direction on how they should conduct activities, making school leaders responsible for school success. Additionally, Habi (2022) conducted a study to explore leadership in high-performing primary schools and how principals demonstrated leadership, which affected teaching and learning. The study was conducted amongst four principals and eight teachers in rural primary schools in Lesotho. Data was collected through telephonic interviews. It was found that leaders had a shared vision to promote learner performance – a vision that encouraged hope, dedication and emphasised continuous improvement (Murphy & Torre, 2015). Furthermore, this promoted collaboration and cooperation towards the achievement of goals (Norman, 2016). This is consistent with leaders who inspires others to work towards the organisation's goals (Simola, 2012). Adopting a shared vision aligned utilising democratic practices towards school improvement, suggesting that instructional leaders are agents of change in school improvement (Bryk, 2010). Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) posits that instructional leaders communicate a certain level of standards, which schools must adhere to. However, Shaked et al. (2021) postulate that instructional leaders should set an example by adopting good practices, and not just give direction to schools.

Moreover, principals were found to adopt positive interpersonal skills by promoting respect, trust, and collaboration to improve learner performance, this aligns with positive leadership practices (Makirimani & Naicker, 2025). Literature indicates that cultivating positive interpersonal skills and cooperation enhances school management (Gurr, 2014; Rigby, 2017). Principals should ensure that teachers are committed and motivated by considering teachers'

well-being and avoiding their dissatisfaction (Lockman & Anuar, 2015). Instructional leadership was found to be used in successful schools (Kilag & Sasan, 2023). These are important aspects to transformational leadership, which is discussed in a later section.

On matters pertaining to learner discipline, participants from Habi's (2022) study reported that they achieved discipline through the collaboration of stakeholders, including learners – and a constant reminder of the school rules and protocols, ensuring the achievement of the school's goals. While the study shows that schools are doing their share in promoting learner performance through effective school management practices, it was found that there have been limited visits to schools by district officials and District Resource Teachers (DRT) due to schools being inaccessible, which severely impacts on the extent to which principals are supported. Many participants indicated that they need the support and guidance on leadership and management matters. Although this study was conducted in rural Lesotho, the findings can also be extended to South Africa, where district officials also find that some schools are inaccessible due to rurality.

Additionally, Neethling (2024) conducted a study of SMT members from six public high schools and district officials in Johannesburg. The study aimed to examine the experiences of how districts provide support to SMTs. Data was collected through semi-structured interviews. Mourshed et al. (2010) indicates that districts have three fundamental responsibilities: offer customised support to schools, ensure that schools understand new policies for successful implementation, and collaborate, support, and share information. Hence, Neethling (2024) makes three vital observations for the education fraternity: capacitating DHs and district officials through networking sessions and workshops to share information and ideas; districts should financially assist schools in programmes that have proved to increase efficacy as the focus should be on the achievement of long-term goals and such programmes are geared towards this and consistent collaboration between SMT and districts. Neethling (2024) concluded that more literature needs to be generated in this field of district leadership because they are a vital component of offering schools support and further investment and streamlining of district roles need to be done as they influence SMT and teacher development directly.

Rorrer et al. (2008) adds that instructional leadership at district level comprises of “monitoring learner performance, enhancing instructional methods, coordinating and aligning the work of others through cooperation, planning and communication.” Instructional leaders i.e., principals

and DHs should engage in teaching and learning practices themselves (Bush, 2013) to get a sense of the factors promoting or hindering teaching and learning. Robinson et al. (2008) concluded that instructional leadership is superior in educational settings. Therefore, DBE (2014) emphasises the importance of school leaders needing professional development. While the study by Neethling (2024) shares contemporary ideas to promote effective instructional leadership practices in schools, the study is limited in the sense that this instructional leadership support is inadequate in public schools and more research in this area is required (Van der Berg et al., 2016). Fullan (2009) also advises that districts must consider the roles that SMTs play in enhancing teaching and learning and ensure that district and SMT roles are aligned.

Grissom et al. (2021) conducted a synthesis (longitudinal) study to investigate the extent to which principals were involved in learner performance and the achievement of school goals and what was the impetus for principals' involvement. The study focused on the USA and literature was examined from 2000 until 2016. The study found that the role of principals has been understated in previous studies. It was found that an effective principal can dramatically improve learner performance in three months. Secondly, effective principal leadership has yielded a positive impact on absenteeism, discipline, teacher efficacy and improving school conditions. These findings emphasise the need to promote effective leadership for principals. Another finding was that principals focused on their roles as instructional leaders, which hinged on working from feedback, mentoring and other instructional activities such as monitoring of teaching and learning. This underscored an environment of trust, collectivism and the promotion of teaching and learning within the school. To achieve these objectives, collaboration, and effective PLCs (Professional Learning Communities) are required, on a sustained basis. Additionally, effective school management practices, which involved the strategic placement of resources, including human resources, impacted on learner achievement. The researchers (Grissom et al., 2021b) found that the study cannot provide a holistic synthesis of all literature available due to limited time and resources and, hence, remains incomplete. They advise that more rigorous studies are needed in this field.

In the South African context, Chabalala and Naidoo (2021) and Bush and Glover (2021) found that instructional leaders are not completely aware of their roles and responsibilities and, therefore, they prioritise management tasks as this is what they can do. This is based on a study of principals who have undertaken the ACESLM (Advanced Certificate in Education in School Leadership and Management). Naidoo (2019) found that the ACESLM accorded positive

results in preparing SMT members in their leadership role. This finding is derived from a study comprised of 600 SMT members and PL1s through quantitative research, by means of questionnaires. Since many school leaders are ill-equipped in their leadership roles, the Department of Basic Education first attempted to introduce competency tests before school leaders occupied their leadership posts. However, this was met with disapproval from various education bodies. It was then thought that the ACESLM would be more suitable to aiding SMTs to develop the necessary leadership competencies. Although the school landscape varies, the ACESLM programme provides leaders with the skills they require to manage their schools.

Anderson et al. (2012), Grissom and Condon (2021a) and Hargreaves (2021) argues that district officials' school improvement would not be possible in the absence of district officials, who are able to create conditions for improvement. SMTs and districts must have a close working relationship for instructional leadership activities to be enacted. Furthermore, Cibane (2020) asserts that the deficiency in management skills of district officials can be attributed to the top-down approach adopted by the national and provincial Departments of Education. The inherent nature of the top-down approach reduces the decision-making power at districts (Cibane, 2020). Van der Berg et al. (2011) posits that there has been an overemphasis on a one-way flow of information, usually top-down in nature. This overlooks other potentially valuable strategies that can be used to improve schools. It is also noted that literature on South African perspectives of district leadership is limited, while international literature increases (Mthembu, 2018). This indicates that there is much more research required in this field. This study seeks to bridge this gap. What emerges from the literature is that instructional leadership is more closely linked with school management, compared to autocratic leadership. This is largely due to teaching and learning being the centre of the work of SMTs. However, where district officials are affected by time, resource and capacity constraints, SMTs, in their instructional leadership capacities may resort to more monitoring over provision of support. Taken together, instructional leadership is important to district officials because they play a vital role in curriculum delivery, providing support, development and reinforcing school management. This reinforces the importance of exploring their instructional leadership role.

2.5.3 Distributed Leadership

This discussion focuses on how district officials share leadership, decision-making and problem-solving with SMTs. The discussion elucidates the extent to which district officials create opportunities for role players to participate. Distributed leadership is considered to be a

more progressive and inclusive approach to leadership. In comparison to autocratic leadership, distributed leadership expands participation and autonomy. Additionally, when compared to instructional leadership, emphasis is placed on the sharing of leadership, instead of the achievement of teaching and learning outcomes. The research presented in this section is organised in accordance with the features of the distributed leadership approach.

2.5.3.1 Collective Decision-Making and Collaboration

Living in a post-COVID-19 world, in an era where technological innovation is greatly influencing education, it is becoming increasingly difficult for leaders and managers to lead and manage schools in the traditional sense and adopting a distributed leadership approach can assist in this regard (Yilmaz & Beycioglu, 2017). For this reason, Grant (2017) views distributed leadership as “fluid and emergent”. The distributed leadership theory has come about as an alternative to autocratic leadership structures and was especially popular in organisations that valued collaboration in working towards common goals (Akyürek & Akkoyun, 2024; Harris et al., 2022). According to Hargreaves et al. (2008), distributed leadership is favoured to ensure that national policies are implemented in schools. Additionally, it is useful in mitigating challenges and leading school improvement. Distributed leadership recognises that leaders and followers have a shared responsibility towards the school by making inputs and decisions collaboratively, which can bring about the transformation of schools (Akyürek & Akkoyun, 2024; Spillane, 2005). Furthermore, it involves sharing of roles and responsibilities within the school, with the emphasis being on interdependent interactions (Harris, 2013). When district officials, SMTs and teachers engage in collective decision-making and collaboration, all role players can share their perspectives and ideas on matters that require attention.

2.5.3.2 Decentralised Power and Democracy

In distributed leadership, power is decentralised as all people in the educational context are seen as leaders (Harris et al., 2022; Halverson and Clifford, 2013; Printy, 2008). Harris et al. (2022) assert that distributed leadership goes beyond the formal positions that leaders have and views leadership as “teamwork”. Decision-making now involves multiple people and ensures they all work towards a common goal (Harris, 2009). Therefore, power is redistributed, and rigid structures of authority are broken down (Spillane, 2006; Muijs et al., 2005).

Grant (2017) and Gunter (2005) advocate for democracy in distributed leadership, which

encompasses leadership being placed in the hands of individuals without the rigidity of hierarchy. Instead, it is a “flatter leadership structure”. Furthermore, it has tendencies to influence leadership at higher levels through the “bottom-up” approach. This is necessary to make structures higher up aware of goals and challenges at grassroots level (Printy & Liu, 2021). Critics argue that albeit the attempt to flatten rigid leadership structures, democratic distributed leadership is aware of the positions of other leaders who receives the “sharing of leadership” (Grant, 2005). Therefore, the success of the distributed leadership approach is dependent on the willingness of appointed leaders to share their authority.

O’Hair and Woods (2024) indicate that there are benefits when distributed leadership is combined with democratic principles. First, people have specialised knowledge to help schools move forward. Second, people have diverse perspectives on issues. Third, these diverse perspectives can contribute a multi-faceted approach to problem-solving. Lastly, all stakeholders communicate regularly to make schools move forward. Utilising democratic practices in distributed leadership is characterised by collaborative decision-making, policy implementation and oversight roles and shared responsibility by the necessary stakeholders towards the school (Kilicoglu, 2018). Kilicoglu (2018) and Woods (2021) posit that schools that practice democracy can overcome difficulties because the sum of the individuals’ capacities is greater than the individual’s capacity. Democratic practices in leadership are necessary in diverse contexts as it is a concept that is entrenched in the principles of “social justice, dignity and rights”, a strategy especially important for South Africa (Harris, 2007; Møller, 2003).

Although distributed leadership is described as collaboration-centred and democratic, as opposed to leadership that is based on hierarchical structures, the implementation of distributed leadership is difficult, especially in the South African context where central authority is prevalent (Harris et al., 2022). Within the education system, national, provincial and district level have controlling power over schools as these structures enforce policy, accountability, and administration, SMTs and teachers still have a diminished sense of authority to positively contribute to learner achievement and the school environment (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). Consequently, distributed leadership may be unevenly and erratically practiced.

2.5.3.3 Utilisation of Expertise

The premise of distributed leadership is that leaders and followers have specialised knowledge

in various areas. Irrespective of the position they are in, when they come together, it can lead to school improvements (Grant, 2017). Additionally, Grubbs (2021) reports that distributed leadership compels “leaders who know how to follow and followers who know how to lead”, this means that those who can play various roles have knowledge and skills, and by extension the necessary leadership skills. Spillane (2012) advocated that openness and transparency is important amongst leaders and followers if distributed leadership is to work. District officials can tap into the reservoirs of knowledge that SMTs and teachers possess which can inform their work.

Collaborative work increases the authority that people have at grassroots level (Harris & Jones, 2010; Spillane, 2006). Distributed leadership empowers and develops others by allowing them to inculcate and hone communication and leadership skills by working collectively (Bush, 2023; Printy & Liu, 2021). People are therefore interconnected by mutually acquiring skills (Brown et al., 2020). Baloglu (2012) postulate that “teamwork, support, vision creating, control” are essential characteristics of distributed leadership. Additionally, distributed leadership recognises that individuals have dormant leadership potential (Akyürek & Akkoyun, 2024).

While there are benefits associated with distributed leadership, figures in authority may be resistant towards adopting the distributed leadership approach. This can be attributed to their reluctance to share authority, mistrust and fear of losing control (Harris et al., 2022). Moreover, distributed leadership requires leaders to have strong interpersonal skills and consult with various role players (Nadeem, 2024). In some schools and districts, the distributed leadership may be difficult to practice, especially when they are overburdened and subject to resource constraints.

Yildirim (2017) found that leaders who adopt distributed leadership shows commitment towards the performance of schools, which is important for improvement (Harris et al., 2022). School improvement is achieved when there is collaboration between SMTs and districts – from having a shared vision to making decisions (Bush, 2023). Additionally, Göksoy (2015) emphasises that people will adopt and support decisions when they are involved in making decisions (Göksoy, 2015). It is noted that there is a positive correlation between distributed leadership and school improvement by improving teaching and learning, learner performance, motivation, and the effectiveness of the staff (Amels et al., 2020; Harris, 2008; Leithwood &

Mascall, 2008).

Gunter (2005) asserts that there are three components to distributed leadership:

1. Work is distributed from the main leader to others, in the case, from districts to SMTs.
2. Work continues in the school, without the rigid barriers of hierarchical structures.
3. Distributed leadership promotes inclusivity through democracy.

Proponents argue that democratic and distributed leadership is inextricably linked (Delgado, 2014; Thompson, 2020). Researchers on distributed leadership suggest that schools and districts have minimal chances of success when leaders work in isolation (Gronn, 2002; Harris & Spillane, 2008; Spillane, 2005). In a diverse and transient country such as South Africa, distributed leadership is vital for school improvement as it requires schools and districts to share information, collaborate and respond effectively to change (Bligh et al., 2006; Gunter, 2005; Printy & Liu, 2021). However, this is not always possible in countries such as South Africa where hierarchical authority structures still exist, placing pressure on structures lower down, thereby affecting districts and schools (Nadeem, 2024). Distributed leadership provides an alternative leadership approach that is inclusive and progressive, its success depends on the willingness of leaders who are in power to share their power with others (Nadeem, 2024). While autocratic leadership demands compliance and authority, distributed leadership increases the participation of role players in the system. For this reason, district leadership can be realistically practiced in some instances but in the broader sense, it may be viewed as an aspirational approach to adopt.

2.5.4 Servant Leadership

District officials shape the morale of SMTs and teachers by providing support, communicating expectations and assisting schools in responding to challenges (Dangmei & Singh, 2017). Servant leadership refers to “behaviours and practices that promote the well-being of people” (Greenleaf Centre for Servant Leadership, 2022). Servant leadership improves morale by promoting teamwork, instituting trust which contributes to greater job satisfaction (Cerit, 2010). In terms of the school-district relationship, this would consist of district officials placing the needs of SMTs, teachers and schools at large ahead of all work that they do. This can be done by district officials being open to listen to the concerns affecting SMTs and schools, and providing the necessary support, instead of enforcing compliance. In comparison to the autocratic and instructional leadership approaches, servant leadership is dependent on relations

and the well-being of people. From the findings in chapter 4, SMTs are confronted with a myriad of challenges which include increased workload, strict deadlines, a lack of resources, discipline issues and changes in the curriculum, which contributes to frustration, anxiety, dissatisfaction, and exhaustion. Therefore, the distributed approach may be relevant in addressing some of these challenges (Mashaba & Maile, 2018; Nkambule & Amsterdam, 2018). In servant leadership, the emphasis is on serving others, in this case, district officials serving SMTs (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022; Johnson, 2021), which is centred on showing sympathy, empathy, compassion, support and empowerment (Spears, 2010).

Makirimani and Naicker (2025) undertook a study to determine the potential for servant leadership in raising morale. Four principals and eight teachers were interviewed. It was found that a lack of support and involvement in decision-making affected morale. Additionally, morale is influenced by factors such as listening, empathy, development, and compassion. Similarly, in a synthesis study conducted by Canavesi and Minelli (2022) aimed to investigate the effects of servant leadership on schools, it was found that where servant leadership was practiced, there was greater job satisfaction, especially when leaders listened, empathised, and provided professional development. Additionally, a study by Emanuel (2018) explored how principals understood the role of servant leadership and how servant leadership affects their schools. Data was generated qualitatively through case study research consisting of five principals, it was found that where servant leadership was practiced, it led to developments in the school environment. The study by Emanuel (2018) notes technological and physical developments in the school environment to create an effective school. What emerges from these studies is that servant leadership is necessary where leaders build relationships based on support, development and fostering school improvement initiatives.

The studies by Makirimani and Naicker (2025), Canavesi and Minelli (2022) and Emanuel (2018) highlighted that a fundamental characteristic of servant leadership is listening and communication. District officials engage with SMTs by listening to their views and communicate with them to find solutions to problems (Van Dierendonck, 2013). Furthermore, when servant leadership is practiced, leaders show compassion and empathy where district officials try to see things from the viewpoints of SMTs. When they do this, trust and relationships are built. Lastly, district officials support and empower SMTs and teachers. When supporting SMTs, district officials provide opportunities for SMTs to grow and develop in their roles (Gupta & Nambudiri, 2022; Spears, 2010). It was found that when servant leadership is

used, it has a positive impact in contributing to cohesive PLCs (Canavesi & Minelli, 2022).

Servant leadership differs from other leadership approaches. While the autocratic leadership approach emphasizes compliance, accountability and limited autonomy, servant leadership emphasises empathy, empowerment, and growth. Contrastingly, instructional leadership focuses on curriculum delivery, teaching and learning, while servant leadership focuses on the development and the well-being of the people responsible for achieving these outcomes. Although these approaches do not exist in isolation, servant leadership may reinforce them and contribute to achieving positive district-school relationships.

Similar criticisms were highlighted in the studies by Makirimani and Naicker (2024) and Canavesi and Minelli (2022), which found that district officials do not always resort to using servant leaders as higher authority structures resist utilisation of this approach (Liden et al., 2008; Sendjaya et al., 2008). While servant leadership has benefits, it must be noted that district officials operate within hierarchical structures which promotes policy implementation, accountability and monitoring, making servant leadership difficult to adopt. Therefore, while servant leadership can be practiced, it can also be largely aspirational as it would depend on district officials and SMTs adopting specific behaviours to practice it consistently. Additionally, the use of servant leadership is dependent on school contextual factors (Sendjaya et al., 2008). However, given the diverse nature of SMTs and districts, when servant leadership is practiced, schools, SMTs and teachers see the benefits.

2.6 How Schools Experience the Work of District Officials

Literature suggests that districts play a vital role in informing the operations of schools by ensuring that policies are implemented and by providing subsequent support to SMTs, and in turn, districts hold SMTs accountable for the school's operations. However, minimal focus is given to how SMTs experience these leadership approaches in reality and how these experiences shape school leadership and management. There is a growing trend for schools to become innovative in their operations to ensure they run smoothly, especially as the world moves towards globalisation (Rickley & Stackhouse, 2022; Shah 2023). Additionally, the following discussion highlights how district leadership is received and how this affects school management.

2.6.1 Perceptions of Top-Down Decision-Making, Rule Enforcement and Compliance

Ideally, there should be interdependence amongst SMTs and districts who should work in harmony (Neethling, 2024). Bhengu and Mkhize (2013) reinforce that SMTs, and districts should “engage and delegate leadership in a trusting environment”. However, this does not always happen and SMTs are usually blamed for their school’s poor performance citing that guidance they receive inadequate from their district counterparts (Neethling, 2024; Spaul, 2013; Taylor, 2008; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016).

Mabaso’s (2021) research was concerned that secondary school learners, in the Pinetown District, were performing satisfactorily in the matric exams, so he sought to investigate the leadership that principals provide that is a possible contributing factor to the satisfactory performance. Additionally, he wanted to investigate the leadership styles that teachers preferred. Participants reported that principals were rigid in their approach, citing that when principals attended meetings, decisions were made beforehand by higher authorities. Furthermore, they do not consider decisions in totality as they firmly believe in their justifications for making decisions (Cherry, 2014). It was further evidenced that when principals encountered situations where higher authorities made decisions for their schools, it translated to principals making decisions unilaterally for their staff. However, participants indicated that they were unhappy about their principals using this approach as they took decisions without consultations, which directly affected teachers (Gill, 2014). Giliç and Inandi (2021) postulated that autocratic and bureaucratic leaders seek control and disregard the views of others. This causes “organisational cynicism, burnout, alienation and exposure to mobbing” (Ferguson, 2011; Hoel et al., 2010; Jiang et al., 2019; Peker et al., 2018). Furthermore, they want to “preserve the rigidity of the organisational hierarchy and attach priority to the work, not human relations” (Giliç & Inandi, 2021).

Additionally, instructional leadership has become an influential approach adopted in schools (Bush, 2020; Tedla & Redda, 2021) and is primarily seen as top-down in nature because principals are viewed as “primary sources of educational expertise and school goals” (Tedla & Redda, 2021). The notion of instructional leadership is that principals are viewed as reservoirs of power, influence, and skills, which greatly reduces the overall quality of the school (Zvandasaraa, 2016). Wang et al. (2022) explain that unilateral decision-making and communication is usually adopted when the emphasis is on policies, processes and procedures and ensuring that employees comply and ensuring the leaders expectations are clear (Lonati,

2021). Decisions made by central authority ensures that processes are clear and streamlined, ensuring that people work towards specific goals (Lorinkova et al., 2013). However, employee creativity is compromised. Tedla and Redda (2021) report that principal's resort to centralised decision-making because the curriculum comes from national government. Therefore, the only option for principals to ensure that curriculum was properly disseminated in their schools was to make decisions unilaterally. Remarkably, a teacher participant was of the view that principals should follow bureaucratic leadership if the intention is to ensure that the curriculum is implemented effectively in schools (Tedla & Redda, 2021). Furthermore, principals conduct classroom visits to ensure teaching and learning occurs and to check that school rules are followed, which promotes learner performance (Day & Sammons, 2016).

Shah (2023) conducted a literature review using the evaluation technique. He found that leaders who adopted an authoritative stance to their leadership, which he also calls "exploitative leadership", shows distrust in their followers (Gyasi et al., 2016). This results in them utilising rewards and punishments (threats and fines) to motivate followers to "direct them" to achieve the organisation's goals (Nassar et al., 2011). Buble (2012) argues that autocratic and bureaucratic leaders may appear arrogant. Furthermore, Harms et al., (2018) add that such leaders exercise their power and control processes in the organisation by specifying how processes and procedures should be followed as discipline within the organisation is the cornerstone. From a bureaucratic perspective, such leaders prioritise the adherence of policies and laws, which may give the impression that they are ineffective leaders. The inputs and ideas of followers are not accepted, especially if these ideas contradict established processes and procedures (Hendryadi et al., 2019). This approach stifles innovation and this stunts the progress of the organisation (Yunarsi et al., 2020). Such leaders are viewed as incapable leaders due to their strict adherence to policies.

These studies show that when district leadership is received as top-down, driven by rule enforcement and compliance, it may affect school leadership and management in a similar manner i.e. that SMTs become more susceptible to following hierarchical structures. This is an important point in this study as it highlights that district officials can directly and indirectly influence how SMTs lead and manage their schools.

2.6.2 Effects on Autonomy, Morale and Relationships

Mabaso's (2021) study also focused on how authoritative figures impacted on teacher morale

and school performance. He collected data from six teachers in this regard. He found that principals who practiced bureaucratic leadership improved teacher performance resulting in teachers being committed to their tasks, encouraging positive staff morale. Furthermore, they worked efficiently and were organised, to achieve the school's objectives. Contrastingly, many teachers opposed the bureaucratic approach, creating an "us versus them" situation. It is noted that principals reduced their spending by reducing the number of temporary teachers they employed by driving staff to carry more load. This aligns to research which indicates that bureaucratic leadership is cost-effective to implement, improves productivity efficiently and contributes to a higher morale. It is also impactful to address problems and manage schools (Iqbal et al., 2015). It was found that schools which used bureaucratic leadership were still effective to an extent and contributed to teachers having a positive attitude towards their work.

In addition, Giliç and Inandi (2021) conducted a study to understand the relationship between leadership styles and organisational cynicism. Data was collected from 426 primary and secondary school teachers in Mersin, Turkey. They found that when school leaders adopted autocratic leadership, teachers developed negative attitudes towards the school and trust in principals gradually decreased. Where autocratic leadership was practiced, employee cynicism and deviant organisational behaviour increased (Jian et al., 2017). Thomas and Gupta (2018) explain that organisational cynicism is when staff have negative attitudes towards an organisation, and it is usually expressed as "frustration, hopelessness and distrust" towards managers. Additionally, Giliç and Inandi (2021) found that autocratic leadership can lead to an insecure and unfair environment creating misalignment between the goals of the organisation and the interests of employees, contributing to low levels of trust amongst employees. This is further exacerbated by stress and tiredness (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Contrastingly, when employees feel supported, they garner feelings of respect and have a positive outlook on the organisation (Rogers & Ashforth, 2017).

A study by Tedla and Redda (2021) aimed to examine the relationship between the leadership of principals and learner-school performance in secondary schools in Eritrea. Qualitative and quantitative data collection methods were used, including questionnaire, interviews, focus groups and observations. A total of 375 people comprising of principals, teachers, learners, and parents participated in the study, which found that the more autocratic the principal is, the more schools tend to perform poorly. This is because principals' resort to using pressure to motivate teachers to do things. The study also found that this creates "resentment, humiliation and

intimidation and eventually” poor learner performance (Sun & Leithwood, 2015). Teacher dissatisfaction and high absenteeism are side-effects of this approach. Research suggests that few principals can adopt instructional leadership by improving both learner and teacher performance (Dutta & Sahney, 2022). Additionally, principals are sometimes overburdened by being solely responsible for the operations in the school (Maponya, 2020). However, there are cases where principals, as instructional leaders positively contribute to learner and teacher performance.

Shah (2023) found that when leaders encouraged followers to make decisions independently, it shows that they have “confidence and trust in their followers’ abilities,” an element of democratic leadership (Bhargavi & Yaseen, 2016). Furthermore, Wang et al., (2022) adds that allowing followers to contribute to the educational process it contributed to the positive mental health of subordinates and creativity and increased performance as well as increased trust in leaders. Since distributed leadership provides people the platform to share their views and ideas, they have power to make decisions that directly affect their work, which leads to more respect for their work and increased performance (Xiang & Long, 2013). They thrive in their jobs and are always willing to help others (Usman et al., 2021). Due to an increase in technological advancements, information flows from the bottom of the organisation to the top, resulting in the importance of followers being involved in decision-making (Wang et al., 2022).

De Souza (2021) undertook research to investigate the effect of distributed leadership on teacher leaders. A phenomenological study took place in a rural Pacific Northwest district with 51 participants from 14 high schools. It was found that distributed leadership was underestimated and where it was practiced, it had different levels of success, and this contributed to the lack of leadership development in people (Diamond & Spillane, 2016). It was found that teachers want to be recognised and valued by their districts and will volunteer to conduct leadership practices if they feel supported. Formal leadership programmes were very rare. However, teachers were resilient to transcend their roles and take leadership roles. The research concludes that districts are propellants, which encourages others to participate in leadership practices. However, when followers are overburdened with more responsibility, they become more stressed (Benoliel & Somech, 2014). Wang et al., (2022) caution against the too-much-of-a-good-thing effect (TMGTE), suggesting that giving followers too much power increases their workload and reduces their wellness (Peng et al., 2021).

These perceptions influence school management. When district leaderships limit autonomy, this results in SMTs focusing more on meeting demands and being less flexible to respond to their school's needs. This contributes to lower morale and trust, which negatively affects collaborative efforts between SMTs and teachers. This may have an overall impact on curriculum delivery and support. To this end, leadership approaches affect how SMTs view the district and how SMTs manage their schools.

2.6.3 Collaboration and Capacity Building in Curriculum Matters

Mabaso's (2021) participants revealed that autocratic principals were easily angered and did not encourage collaboration amongst teachers. This is further corroborated in research by Gill (2014) who found that followers of autocratic leaders were deterred from collaborating on policy matters. Autocratic leaders are biased when making decisions as they prefer their uncontested views on matters, and they show minimal interest in acquiring the views of others (Cherry, 2014). On the other hand, principals who adopt the instructional leadership approach manage teachers, tracking the extent to which the curriculum is followed and providing feedback to stakeholders on school matters (Maponya, 2020). Additionally, principals are responsible for sharing different teaching methodologies with teachers and procuring resources to enhance instruction (Maponya, 2020). Mabaso (2021) is of the view that when leaders adopted instructional leadership practices, there was a direct correlation between the amount of work teachers put in, to learner performance. Instructional leadership is commonly adopted to promote effective teaching and learning in schools by prioritising curriculum, rather than school management (Gümüs et al., 2021). To improve learner performance, principals enforce rules. Instructional leadership is explicit and impactful for teachers and learners (Day & Sammons, 2016).

Mosoge and Mataboge (2021) are of the view that in South Africa, instructional leadership is practiced by restoring adequate teaching and learning. Rostini et al. (2022) argues that managing teaching and learning remains a primary activity for principals and school management. Shaked et al. (2021) purport that adopting instructional leadership may save failing schools. While some researchers contend that instructional leadership focuses on the work of teachers and learners (Grobler and Conley, 2013; Naicker et al., 2013) other researchers contend that the focus is on the principal's actions that influence learner achievement (Mitchell & Castle, 2005). Mosoge and Mataboge (2021) postulates that principals, SMTs and teachers should work together to set the school vision and goals to enhance teaching and learning.

A study by Mosoge and Mataboge (2021) aimed to investigate the extent to which principals performed instructional leadership duties and subsequently, what was the effect on SMTs. Data was collected by means of a questionnaire from principals, DPs (Deputy Principals) and DHs. Data was generated quantitatively from Tshwane-West District. It was found that rural school principals performed more instructional leadership tasks, compared to principals from urban schools. This can be attributed to rural schools experiencing more difficulties in terms of limited funds, materials, and HR resources (Du Plessis, 2017). Furthermore, SMTs who were empowered were able to promote the goals of the school and shoulder more responsibility. Mestry (2017) believes that principals are inundated with financial, human resources and policy management and therefore, principals should capacitate DHs and teachers with instructional leadership so they can oversee curriculum management for their subjects/departments and the principal can oversee management tasks.

From another perspective, Mabaso (2021) found that principals who encouraged participation amongst the staff highlighted that teachers were involved in collaborative decision-making, which improved teacher's commitment and job satisfaction. Additionally, principals were found to be selective when they adopted democracy, which was especially practiced when promoting inclusivity amongst new teachers in the school. These findings align with Northouse (2011) who states that distributed leadership allows others to share inputs and ideas towards the betterment of the school. Additionally, there are several benefits of democratic leadership including "job security" and financial benefits (Amanchukwu et al., 2015). However, Woods (2021) argues that the democratic style empowers people to develop themselves and acquire skills, which are more rewarding than financial gains. In contrast, collaboration on decisions may delay decision-making and older employees may become more dominant during these processes, citing they have more experience and knowledge on matters (Khan et al., 2021). Findings indicate that individuals are encouraged to share their ideas and concerns openly while doing so fruitfully (Woods, 2021). Based on this collaboration, the leader makes the ultimate decision by taking into consideration all inputs.

Principals who practiced distributed leadership indicated that the tasks they are expected to achieve are large and they seek the assistance of others (Mabaso, 2021). However, research suggests that resentment may arise in teachers when selected individuals are requested to assist in leadership and managerial roles. The individuals who are selected are usually close colleagues of the principal who already support the work he or she does and other teachers who

constantly work hard are sidelined and ill-prepared for leadership roles (Mabaso, 2021; Squires, 2015). Squires (2015) argues that principals choose to hold the monopoly over their positions and discourage other teachers to later become principals themselves. Traditional principals sabotage the benefits of distributed leadership by punishing teachers who were “not appointed by them” by forcing such teachers into difficult situations whereby they show defiance (Ndwandwe, 2021). It was found that principals discontinue distributed leadership when teachers share opposing views to the principal (Bolden et al., 2015). However, if leadership roles are shared equitably, consensus reached during discussions become easy to implement as there is buy-in from all leaders. There is better job satisfaction as there is an existence of teamwork (Yammarino et al., 2012) Democratic leadership was favoured amongst participants. It was noted that principals consider all options before making decisions. This leadership style allows individuals to acquire knowledge and skills, which are more valuable than financial gain (Amanchukwu et al., 2015; Woods, 2021).

Wang et al. (2022) adds that distributed leadership occurs when there is trust between the leader and followers and organisational problems are resolved through democratic processes. Although followers share their ideas and inputs, it is the leader who makes the final decision. However, followers require encouragement to participate in such processes (Huang et al., 2010). The function of managers in distributed leadership is to provide opportunities for subordinates to contribute to decision-making (Benoliel & Somech, 2014). There is sharing of power between leaders and followers and followers have a level of independence in how they carry out their jobs (Kim & Beehr, 2024).

Taken together, the literature points out that schools receive district leadership based on leadership which is practiced by higher authority structures. Leadership driven by authority structures, strict monitoring, compliance and accountability may thwart autonomy, reduce morale and negatively affect teaching and learning, collaboration and school improvement. Conversely, leadership that is driven by participation and support can improve trust and build capacity.

2.7 Strategies for Improving District Leadership

This section is framed according to the principles set out in the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), which outlines the core roles of the district, which include planning, supporting, overseeing and accountability. This section

is also based on the principles of the National Development Plan (National Planning Commission, 2012) which calls for the services provided by public institutions to be professional, better equipped, and able to respond to the needs of the people.

2.7.1 Adopting a Shared Vision and Mission within the District

Marzano and Waters (2009) advise that districts and schools should set goals collaboratively. This ensures that goal setting does not occur without the input of relevant stakeholders who can provide valuable insights on the extent to which these goals can be achieved in their various contexts. Furthermore, they advise that schools should be equipped with the necessary resources to ensure the goals can be achieved and regular monitoring in schools to check to what extent the goals are being achieved. This strategy is consistent with distributed and transformational leadership which is centred around a shared vision through collaboration towards school improvement.

Additionally, Fullan's (2009) study, which concentrated on countries such as the United States of America, United Kingdom and Canada, focused on establishing a united leadership system across these contexts, argues that district officials have a moral obligation to schools and that is to encourage schools to improve, when this idea is emphasised, better relationships between schools, communities and district offices are forged. Successful leadership should therefore aim to establish a unified vision and mission, which sets the direction of schools and the district (Fullan, 2009. DuFour and Marzano (2011) agree that when there is uniformity in the vision and mission, district officials can monitor the progress of the achievement of goals in schools.

Furthermore, Childress et al. (2007) found that the mission and vision of the district can be infiltrated throughout the system by formulating strategies that has an impact on school management and learner achievement. Contrastingly, Leithwood (2010) contends that ideally, there must be a link between leadership at school level and learner achievement to advocate change. However, district officials must spend a fair amount of time in schools resolving mission and vision issues with the aim of streamlining the school and district culture and promoting cohesion (Fullan, 2009; Leithwood and Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2016).

When districts work in tandem with schools towards a common vision and mission, it refines the skills of leaders through empowerment and dedication (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Togneri and Anderson (2003), postulate that when schools and districts work towards a shared vision,

it leads to improved teaching and learning as well as the creation of conducive environments for teaching and learning. It is becoming increasingly important for schools and districts to work towards common goals and effective communication is the vehicle that leads to improvement (Fullan, 2009). Setting the mission and vision of the district should not stop there. Efforts should be made towards actively pursuing these goals (DuFour & Marzano, 2011).

Marzano and Waters (2009) and Marzano & Waters (2009) additionally identifies five main features of goal-directed districts:

1. Involvement of all stakeholders in setting goals.
2. Setting fixed goals for teaching and learning that can be filtered throughout the system.
3. Stakeholder alignment and their support of fixed goals.
4. Tracking the progress of achievement of these goals.

While there is some agreement that there is an obligation for districts to have a shared mission and vision, Honig (2012) argues that it is becoming increasingly difficult to achieve this amid differing contexts and complex challenges that districts face. Honig (2012) adds that there may be inconsistencies with adopting a shared mission and vision as some sections of the district may choose to be independent. However, having a shared vision promotes collaboration and cooperation and serves as an important factor in building positive relationships with SMTs and districts (Murphy & Torre, 2015).

2.7.2 Fundamental Leadership Characteristics

The characteristics described in this section aligns to the distributed, servant and transformational leadership approaches, which emphasise trust and collaboration, especially where districts are required to lend support to schools. Teachers and SMTs must have inputs on how to lead as they have “real-world specialisation... perceiving problems before they materialise” (Anderson & Rincón-Gallardo, 2021). A study conducted by Anderson and Rincón-Gallardo (2021) stated that effective districts were found to have specialised and updated knowledge on matters. In another study with a similar intention conducted by Garcia (2024), data was generated from an online group of 15 professional teachers on *The Teacher Circle* on *LinkedIn* in the United States of America. Participants shared that they viewed leaders as being highly effective when they utilised effective leadership strategies, collaborative networks, and trust.

Grissom and Condon (2021a) contend that communication is vital amongst schools and districts and there needs to be two-way communication to collect information and make decisions, they propose that communication is built on trust and transparency. Additionally, communication must be ongoing to ensure the understanding of information is received and executed as it is intended, which contributes to collaborative relationships (Potter et al., 2020). Leadership consists of two main functions: guiding and influencing (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003; Wahlstrom et al., 2010). Although, effective leadership requires the leader to work through others to achieve goals (Leithwood & Riehl, 2003), Louis et al. (2016) asserts that despite the type of leadership approach used, a common thread runs through all leadership approaches, which is, foregrounding trust and building relationships. These characteristics stand in opposition to autocratic leadership, which emphasises a one-directional method of communication and decision-making. By centralising trust and two-way communication between schools and districts, district officials can build stronger relationships with schools.

King and Holland (2025) claim that for the work of district officials to be successful, formulating a leadership style that is stimulating and significant is vital. Furthermore, district officials preferred a leadership style where they were viewed as “professional learning facilitators” who focused on learner achievement. Gray et al. (2022) argued that constant and functional leadership contributes to the success of a district. However, due to changes in policy, leadership approaches used by school leaders have been in the spotlight to improve learner achievement (LaDue, 2021). Moreover, the scope of school leadership has broadened to include school management, managing finances, policies, and resources (Seashore-Louis & Robinson, 2012).

In the South African context, Bantwini (2015) suggests using a combination of top-down and bottom-up approaches. The rigidity of using one type of leadership distorts the information that the top level receives as information and decisions should flow both ways: top-down – policies from national and provincial level to districts and schools; and bottom-up where schools inform higher authorities of challenges that they are facing so that higher authorities can provide the required assistance to ensure smooth policy implementation (Bantwini, 2015). The consolidation of the top-down and bottom-up approaches to leadership may provide a balance between encouraging participation while holding people accountable, thereby aligning with instructional and distributed leadership practices.

Leithwood et al. (2010) indicate that leadership at the school level is considered vital in meeting the district's goals. LaDue (2021) asserts that to achieve this, district officials need to focus on supporting schools to improve teaching and learning. Lee et al. (2012) reported that when districts support principals, while maintaining accountability, learner achievement improves. However, it is noted that support from districts and the ability for district officials to build principal capability is limited (LaDue, 2021). Therefore, the role of the district is to provide direction and inculcate skills of those within the system to deliver that direction (Waters & Marzano, 2006). However, research calls for a positive relationship between district officials and principals to be forged, but it does not elucidate on what it involves (Honig, 2012).

2.7.3 Professional Development

Professional development can be deemed a practical indication of the work of district officials, and is closely tied with instructional leadership. In their instructional capacities, district officials emphasise school improvements through teaching and learning, all of which are grounded in developing SMTs and teachers. SMTs need to be given direction on how to traverse through changes in the education sector. This is pertinent post-COVID-19 and in an era marked by the height of technological innovation. Districts should consider the contexts in which SMTs operate and use this as a point of reference to create platforms for SMTs and districts to share best practices. Districts must in turn, model positive characteristics (Grissom et al., 2021; Steyn & Fuller, 2024). District officials should additionally provide well-rounded professional development programmes that allow for holistically developing the leadership capacity of SMTs.

Naidoo (2019) suggests making the ACESLM programme more accessible and compulsory for SMTs, CMs and district officials to capacitate them in their leadership roles. Although district officials and CMs reported that they were not completely aware of what their jobs entailed, such programmes may provide the necessary grounding to effectively assist schools. Additionally, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) and Bantwini (2015) advise that districts should work collaboratively with SMTs to ensure they are supported professionally and given the necessary managerial skills to steer the school (RSA, 2012). Anderson and Rincón-Gallardo (2021) postulated that teachers and school leaders perform optimally when their “professional and personal worlds are supported by districts”. They also stressed that teachers and school leaders appreciated professional development that was embedded in their work (Louis et al., 2010; Neethling, 2024) and that sustained monitoring is required by districts to check whether

it is successfully implemented. This is pertinent in cases where district leadership traditionally adopted a compliance-driven approach. As a result, district leadership can be extended to building capacity.

Furthermore, The *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) emphasises the need for SMTs and other teachers to receive leadership training, which enables SMTs to guide schools to achieve the vision and goals of the district, and at the same time, improve teaching and learning (Neethling, 2024). Research indicates that SMTs cannot improve teaching and learning when there is a lack of support from the district (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Neethling, 2024; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Additionally, it is important for principals and SMTs to improve their instructional practices to improve teaching and learning (Leithwood and Louis, 2012). Honig (2012), espouses that districts should prioritise professional development for principals to capacitate them in their leadership of schools. Fullan (2009) adds that when people work together, their unified abilities enable them to accomplish great things. This ideology allows for the generation of ideas for good practices and commitment from all individuals. Professional development activities comprise of on-the-job activities that allow school-level personnel to stay abreast of development in the field and be updated on policy frameworks. This enhances their proficiency in the field (Friedman & Phillips, 2004).

Grissom et al. (2021) propose the establishment of PLCs to ensure SMTs and district officials' development. PLCs are closely linked with the characteristics of distributed leadership, where leadership is shared amongst other role players. Louis et al. (2016) elaborates that professional development initiatives that are relevant and continuous and occurs within PLCs can have a positive influence on schools. Moreover, the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education states that developing school stakeholders can be done in PLCs (DBE, 2011). Copland and Blum (2007) are of the view that as leaders upskill themselves, they become well-versed in goal setting and resolving problems. The establishment of PLCs, which guide principals on improving their leadership capabilities can yield positive results by enhancing their leadership skills through engagement and training (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig & Rainey, 2015). However, some professional development programmes tend to be stand-alone and imposed on stakeholders. As a result, the need arises for district officials to expediate the functionality of PLCs (DBE, 2011). PLCs would be tasked with inculcating leadership qualities in its members.

DuFour and Marzano (2011) argue that district officials need to accept their role in this regard by having clear expectations, goals, structures and processes, resources and continuous support and monitoring the progress of the PLC. Establishing PLCs results in the creation of a well-functioning unit promotes effectiveness within the district and uses evidence to steer improvement (Louis et al., 2016). Mthembu (2018) reports that this is only possible if the district officials heading the PLC is committed and involved. However, for this process to work effectively, collaborative meetings of principals and SMT members must be facilitated by district officials (Thessin, 2015). When such meetings are facilitated by district officials, principals are provided with opportunities to engage with others. They are then equipped with knowledge and tools to refine their skills and adopt good practices (Thessin, 2015). On the other hand, principals reported that districts held them accountable for learner achievement although they did not receive appropriate professional development programmes from district-level (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). Consequently, district officials encourage support and continuous learning in PLCs as the focus is no longer who holds superior knowledge on a particular subject. It is about collaborative improvement towards a common goal (DuFour, 2004). When district officials are actively involved in PLCs, they ensure that the top-down approach that is traditionally followed is circumvented (Talbert, 2009).

2.7.4 Provision of Individualised Support and Monitoring

This strategy is a result of a key tension described in section 2.5, which highlights the differences between compliance-driven and supportive leadership. The provision of individualised support requires districts to go beyond autocratic practices towards instructional and servant leadership. District officials are tasked with guiding school functionality to ensure that schools function optimally by ensuring that policies are implemented, and school rules and procedures are followed (RSA, 2012). Schools were found to receive interventions from districts. However, this was viewed as pressurising instead of supportive (Narsee, 2006). District officials spent more time monitoring and overseeing policy implementation in schools, instead of providing support strategies for schools to overcome their problems (Narsee, 2006). Additionally, Mavuso (2013) revealed that district officials' roles were administrative in nature, with an emphasis on monitoring policy compliance and resource allocation. SMTs therefore interpreted the role of district officials as compliance-centred instead of supportive and this sent conflicting information to SMTs (Mavuso, 2013).

In a study conducted by Bantwini (2018), it was reported that schools in the Eastern Cape

expressed low confidence in district officials to render support to schools. Another study by Naicker and Mestry (2015), conducted in schools across South Africa, found that there was minimal collaboration between district officials and principals. The lack of support from districts can hinder school improvement. These findings are pertinent in the South African landscape as it portrays the dynamics between schools and districts, which can be understood by various other schools and districts who find themselves in similar situations.

Anderson and Rincón-Gallardo (2021) report that high-performing school districts provided specialised support to schools. This finding was based on a study conducted in four high-performing, poverty-affected schools in South Texas, United States of America. However, there are reports that low-performing schools have much of the district's attention and high-performing schools are often neglected. Christie et al. (2007) also reported a similar finding in South Africa, indicating that successful schools are overlooked as they do not receive much support from district level. However, strong leaders from the SMT are needed to traverse the circumstances that schools find themselves in to achieve success. While Lee et al. (2012) states that support to such schools is vital in maintaining good performance, too much attention is given to low-performing schools. Furthermore, these authors note that a "one-size-fits-all" approach can be detrimental to school success (Lee et al., 2012). District officials resort to a "one-size-fits-all" approach as there is mounting pressure from accountability structures (Lee et al., 2012). Since different education districts prioritise different areas of improvement, the provision of specialised support to schools is important (Mourshed et al., 2010; Yoon, 2008).

In addition to this, a study conducted in the USA by LaDue (2021), explores how district officials can strengthen the abilities of principals by developing them as instructional leaders. Data was collected from 21 participants, comprising of district leaders and principals. The study highlighted that district officials play a supportive role in assisting principals to create effective schools. Principals indicated that shared leadership and partnerships are needed to create effective schools. Principals also shared that they needed more clarity on system processes to ensure their schools were aligned, citing that districts were responsible for creating coherence between educational structures. The researcher reported that principals did not want more autonomy. Rather, they required more guidance and direction from districts (LaDue, 2021). Additionally, a more collaborative approach is needed when districts work with schools (Bantwini, 2015; Mapetere, 2015). When districts work collaboratively with schools, actionable programmes can be developed that not only support learner achievement, but also

enhance school management practices (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Fullan, 2015; Mourshed et al., 2010; Neethling, 2024)

More visibility of district officials is needed in schools (Dhanpat & Naicker, 2024). Monitoring schools, checking performance, giving feedback, and setting targets should be done routinely (Bush & Glover, 2021). Research undertaken by Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) in Senegal, Burkina Faso, Benin, and Mali found that the meetings that occurred between officials in the education office and schools, were opportunities to share information and was largely administrative in nature. It was revealed that monitoring of schools was conducted by inspectors and other teaching advisors (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). Such visits were used to inspect the work on principals and teachers (Mavuso, 2013). It is reported that visits conducted by district officials may or may not be known of in advance (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010) and unannounced visits had a positive result as the work of teachers and principals were up to date in anticipation for such visits (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). However, it was reported that teachers and principals did not receive adequate support and advice during their visits (Mavuso, 2013).

Additionally, a participant from the study by Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) referred to the inspectors as “policemen at school”. This support was viewed as “policing” (Mavuso, 2013). In addition, this study found that bringing power to local levels enabled school leaders to have a say in decision-making, considering the contexts they find themselves in. Moreover, district officials can perform optimally to support schools when they have adequate resources (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). A finding that stands out is that the transference of power and authority from national to local level, reduces accountability and leads to infrequent monitoring of schools by the district, which leads to uneven achievement of goals across the district (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). It was also found that leaders who were well equipped in their roles and had strong leadership skills were better communicators with schools, which ensured that schools under their care were aligned to the districts goals and there was effective implementation of policy, as compared to those that showed weaker leadership.

On the other hand, in Mali, “instructional evaluations” occurred, as opposed to “inspections” (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). These evaluations were conducted primarily to provide support and advice and as a result, schools were more amenable to such visits (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). These visits were conducted on a weekly basis to support and advise principals on school

management matters and promoting collaborations between the local education office officials and teachers (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010). The aim of this approach was to improve the work of principals and teachers and was found to yield positive results (Lugaz & De Grauwe, 2010).

Lee et al. (2012) therefore claims that a differentiated approach to school improvement is beneficial as each school has different “priorities, strengths, weaknesses and circumstances” (Lee et al., 2012). Districts can provide individual support to schools in five ways. Firstly, providing interventions in schools in a phased approach (phased intervention), providing targeted support, specific response to school issues (targeted intervention), allocating resources according to the needs of the school (categorical differentiation), establishing personal relationships between schools and district officials to receive a variety of support interventions (micro-political differentiation) (Anderson et al., 2012).

Districts carry out oversight visits to schools to ensure that teaching and learning takes place, which reduces the likelihood of possible underperformance. They also check the work of SMTs and teachers to ensure that standards are maintained, and policies are implemented appropriately. Depending on the outcome of school monitoring processes, districts must collaborate with SMT by offering “management and professional support” (Moloi & Chetty, 2010; Neethling, 2024). Research indicates that districts are ill-equipped to provide this support to schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017; Mavuso, 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2015). Effective teaching and learning are the crucial functions of SMTs (Bush, 2013), which is best done through monitoring (Neethling, 2024). School visits should be regular and purposeful, with the intention of supporting SMTs (Bottery, 2016; Van der Voort & Wood, 2016). An important observation made here is that trust and morale declines in the presence of inspections or “policing”. Instead, support based on the ability for district officials to listen and advise may create stronger SMTs and schools.

2.8 Gaps Arising from the Literature

There was a substantial amount of literature available from the western world which explored district leadership, especially between 2000 to 2010. The western literature consulted provided much insight and guidelines on how other contexts can optimise district leadership for the benefit of schools and learners. Between 2010 and 2024, western literature predominantly focused on synthesising collated literature from various countries of the world and provided subsequent comparative analysis of leadership and districts. However, in South Africa, between

2010 and 2024, the focus has been on exploring teacher and principal leadership, neglecting the impact that districts have on school leadership. Since 1994, there were few studies that gave some insight regarding district leadership in South Africa. Studies that examined leadership of other education spheres, namely, principals and teachers, allowed me to draw parallels to districts and SMTs. Moreover, in the section that dealt with improving district leadership, studies prior to 2015 were used from the western world to offer insight and improve the work of districts and to strengthen the relationships between districts and SMTs. I predominantly drew strategies from western literature as I found that some ideas can be beneficial to South Africa, and that such strategies were minimal or absent from South African literature. It is for this reason that I have undertaken this study, with the hope of bridging this gap in literature.

2.9 Theoretical Framework

This study is framed according to the principles of Transformational Leadership Theory. It is theory which has evolved as a response to change, or transform, the education sector in keeping up with the changes in society at large. It provides an interpretive lens when analysing district leadership in the face of the leadership and management needs of SMTs.

2.9.1 Transformational Leadership Theory

Transformational Leadership Theory has come about because of researchers recognising that leadership is more than social connections between leaders and followers, as was previously envisaged, but it has evolved because leaders started placing value on their follower's self-worth and contribution to the school environment (Bass & Reggio, 2006). Transformational leadership theory is considered the most influential and widely used in the field of educational leadership (Bush, 2014; Kareem et al., 2023). To this end, Bass and Avolio (1994) formulated the "Full Range Leadership Model" placing transformational leadership ahead of all leadership approaches. (Irianti et al., 2024). It is accepted as an ideal leadership approach for school leadership (Kareem et al., 2023). Additionally, the aim of the transformational leadership is to change followers and organisations by expanding the scope of followers and their perceptions of the organisation thereof (Nanjundeswaraswamy & Swamy 2014; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2023).

According to Anderson (2017) and Wilson Heenan et al. (2023), transformational leaders are positioned at a juncture that can strengthen the capabilities of their followers and inspire them to achieve more than they are expected to (Pineda, 2024). Leaders encourage and inspire their

followers to achieve growth within the organisation, as this will guide the future success of the organisation (Berkovich, 2016; Wilson Heenan et al., 2023; Kareem et al., 2023; Pineda, 2024; Schmitz et al., 2023). Shava and Heystek (2021) are of the view that the transformational leadership approach allows followers to develop self-confidence, improved self-esteem, and effectiveness within the organisation. Transformational leadership empowers the followers in an organisation to exceed expectations by changing their mindsets, beliefs, and standards, rather than garnering the followers' compliance as it promotes followers to think innovatively (Pineda, 2024; Schmitz et al., 2023).

Transformational leadership comprises of task-oriented behaviour and relationship-oriented behaviour. Task-oriented behaviour deals with the degree to which leaders organise and outline the responsibilities of their followers; relationship-oriented behaviour deals with the degree to which leaders maintain relationships with their followers (Layaman et al., 2021). For this reason, transformational leaders are viewed as agents of change. This change is achieved when leaders outline and communicate the organisation's goals and vision; deploying resources and garnering support; promoting collective learning and driving transformation through the synergy between leaders and followers (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023; Pineda, 2024; Schmitz et al., 2023).

When followers work towards common goals of the organisation, they become creative problem-solvers and leaders can raise them to higher levels; equipping them to become leaders themselves (Berkovich, 2016; Shava & Heystek, 2021; Schmitz et al., 2023). Uhr and Walter (2014) found that the decisions made by transformational leaders are honest, ethical, and fair. Additionally, when leaders adopted a transformational leadership approach, this contributed to positive teaching and learning environments. Furthermore, leaders who worked with others to develop a shared vision, cater to individual needs and inspired growth and development within followers yielded an environment that encouraged innovation and transformation (Wilson Heenan et al., 2023; Shava & Heystek, 2021). For this reason, Kirkbride (2006) in Bush and Glover (2014) found that the transformational leadership approach and leadership effectiveness are related.

Bass and Avolio (1994) conceptualised four dimensions associated with the transformational leadership theory. These dimensions attempt to determine whether district officials are perceived as trustworthy role models by SMTs, whether they engage in reflection and problem-

solving, whether they motivate SMTs to adopt a shared vision and whether they respond to the specific needs of schools.

2.9.1.1 Idealised Influence

Idealised influence is defined as the degree to which leaders, consciously or unconsciously, influence their followers. They are seen as role models who create conducive environments for teaching and learning, which ultimately achieves the goals of the organisation (Kirkman et al., 2009). Irianti et al. (2024) postulate that the leader is seen as a role model who garners “admiration, respect and trust”. There is a perpetual sense of unity as the leader guides the followers, but also allows them to solve problems independently. (Greiman et al., 2007). When districts show positive characteristics, such as leading by example, modelling professionalism and respecting others, they prioritise a sense of duty, values and beliefs and ethics. If district officials place value on these characteristics, SMTs may be inspired to inculcate these traits as well. (Cibane, 2020). Furthermore, this allows schools to align themselves with the districts goals and to promote collaboration. (Bush & Glover, 2014). In terms of this study, idealised influence can explore whether district officials can be described by SMTs as professional and ethical who build confidence and trust.

2.9.1.2 Intellectual Stimulation

Intellectual stimulation is when leaders do not follow the status quo, which results in ideas being continuously challenged as new ideas come to the fore. This contributes to making decisions that achieves a higher purpose (Paarlberg & Lavigna, 2010). When people come together collectively to make decisions, this results in a heterogeneous, tolerant, and accommodating environment (Greiman et al., 2007). Transformational leadership thrives in organisations that recognise the value of innovation and adaptability. However, inflexible organisations that are bureaucratic result in subordinates being reluctant to changes (Irianti et al., 2024; Jung et al., 2003). Intellectual stimulation appeals to higher order thinking skills, which compels people to utilise their creativity to solve problems. In this way, they also hone new skills (Cibane, 2020). For example, district officials stimulate SMTs to engage in a process of reflection whereby they assess current practices, procedures and systems that are used by the school and determine the weaknesses and strengths thereof. Where there are weaknesses, SMTs and teachers can innovate by streamlining and improving them. This process also creates opportunities for professional development. Mthembu (2018) asserts that this is especially important to improve instruction. As with other leadership approaches, followers make

mistakes when they are given opportunities, but what sets transformational leaders apart is that they do not criticise their followers nor their ideas publicly (Bass & Reggio, 2006). This dimension tries to determine whether district officials stimulate SMTs to solve problems and think critically in terms of solving challenges experienced in schools.

2.9.1.3 Inspirational Motivation

Inspirational motivation is defined as the extent to which the leader creates an attractive vision, which encourages and motivates followers to go beyond normal expectations (Bass & Avolio, 1994). Both leaders and followers have a sense of ownership in the vision. However, the steps to achieving the goals must be clearly defined (Sivarat et al., 2021). By motivating others, leaders can improve schools (Sivarat et al., 2021; Greiman et al., 2007). Irianti et al. (2024) postulate that when leaders disseminate a lucid vision where subordinates feel involved and inspired to set goals, they contribute towards achieving the mission and vision of the organisation. The transformational leader is a node of encouragement and inspiration. For example, district officials can inspire SMTs by communicating a positive and clear vision which promotes learner performance and school improvement, fostering commitment and collective effort towards achieving this vision (Bass & Reggio, 2006). This dimension is important in determining whether district officials motivate SMTs to work towards common goals through communicating a clear vision for improvement.

2.9.1.4 Individual Consideration

Individual consideration is defined as the degree to which leaders are concerned with their followers' concerns (Khan et al., 2022). Leaders realise that their followers are different, hence, they have different motivations. Transformational leaders build relationships with their members and listen to their challenges and provide subsequent skills to enable them to achieve more as transformational leaders act as coaches or mentors (Ariokiasamy et al., 2016; Greiman et al., 2007). Irianti, et al. (2024) postulate that leaders can identify the needs and potential of others and providing subsequent support and motivation (Bass & Reggio, 2006). In districts and schools, leaders recognise that schools are unique and therefore have varying needs, this propels them to improve conditions enabling the satisfaction of followers (Shava & Heystek, 2021). Bass and Reggio (2006) share that when leaders demonstrate individual consideration, they are active listeners and accept the uniqueness of individuals and organisations and therefore promote two-way communication. For example, district officials are at a juncture where they can provide individualised support to schools within their jurisdiction based on the

needs of each school. They realise that a “one-size-fits-all” approach is not conducive to improving and therefore put in place structures to improve these conditions. Tasks that are given to followers are done so for their development and are monitored by leaders (Bass & Reggio, 2006). In light of this study, this dimension is important as schools experience varying challenges in varying contexts, as a result, individualised approach is required to respond appropriately. The individual consideration dimension explores the extent to which district officials respond to the varying challenges school face and how they support SMTs in this regard.

In keeping with the research questions of this study, the four dimensions outlined create a basis on how district leadership can be strengthened. Bakker et al. (2023) succinctly summarises the above-mentioned constructs by Bass and Avolio (1994) as follows:

- i. Encourage followers to realise the importance of day-to-day leadership and management duties.
- ii. Promote the need to develop professionally and personally.
- iii. Encourage followers to contribute positively towards the organisation.

Transformational leadership is operationalised when typical leaders, such as principals and district officials, realise that they are not solely responsible for creating conditions for creating the conditions postulated by Bass and Avolio (1994), it is best when leadership is shared amongst all role players, such as SMTs and teachers, as not a single person assumes leadership roles (Alzoraiki et al., 2024; Leithwood & Janzi, 2005; Shava & Heystek, 2021). For this reason, transformational leadership is considered as a beneficial tool that enables people to construct goals collectively and promotes positive changes in a school (Arokiasamy et al., 2016). Not only does transformational leadership focus on the school and district context, but also on developing people, which has been found to improve “teaching efficacy, job satisfaction and organisational commitment” (Arokiasamy et al., 2016). Transformational leaders create conducive environments where they can all contribute to school improvements and change by sharing ideas and learning, which links with broader district goals (Shava & Heystek, 2021). Additionally, transformational leadership is associated with elements of the “bottom-up” approach, and at the same time, it encourages development of role players putting in place supportive leadership structures (Schmitz et al., 2023). However, Ruloff and Petko (2022) suggest that transformational leadership is especially beneficial when it is used as a combination of “bottom-up” and “top-down” approaches, as this combination has been found

in schools which have achieved success. In this study, Transformational Leadership Theory will be used to identify where SMTs support the theory; where it is partially practiced and where it is limited. It serves as a means of critical analysis over description.

Furthermore, Transformational Leadership Theory emphasises that schools must change to keep up with rapid advancements in the world (Heenan et al., 2023; Schmitz et al., 2023). This is achieved by prioritising the needs of schools and districts, over the needs of people (Alzoraiki et al., 2024). It capacitates and empowers people who were not previously recognised as leaders (Pineda, 2024; Schmitz et al., 2023). People within the school and district can participate by sharing information and finding creative solutions to tackle challenges. Additionally, when transformational leadership is adopted, districts and schools work interdependently by capitalising on collaboration and communication, to achieve the goals of the school and district. Lastly, in the face of continuous change and uncertainty, what was previously rigid leadership structures, are gradually breaking down and becoming more porous, therefore, it is necessary to change, or ‘transform’ current education structures and practices.

Transformational Leadership Theory is used as an interpretive lens to explore how the leadership approaches of district officials are experienced by SMTs and how these approaches impact on school management. This theory is suitable for this study as the focus is on how leadership is based on relationships and development, instead of enforcing authority. In the light of this the dimensions set out by Bass and Avolio (1994) provides analytic labels in the face of how district leadership is experienced, whether the leadership encourages creative thinking or problem-solving, whether district officials are worthy role models to SMTs, whether district officials motivate SMTs and how district officials respond to the contextual needs of a school. Additionally, the four dimensions will guide interpretation when experiences may align with Transformational Leadership Theory. The Transformational Leadership Theory will be used as a benchmark to identify where the participants’ experiences are supported and where the theory falls short.

2.10 Chapter Summary

This chapter presented the various debates surrounding the leadership approaches adopted in the education fraternity. Firstly, contemporary leadership approaches were presented, which revealed a shift from the primitive, passive role of districts to the district being a more active component in schools. Districts are a point of support and inspiration for school management. Hence, they are viewed as middle-level management between local schools and the province.

The focus has shifted from certain individuals holding formal leadership positions to involving the district and SMT components in collaborative decision-making processes that drive school improvement by optimising school management processes. Additionally, strategies for improving district leadership were discussed. Lastly, the study is framed according to the principles of Transformational Leadership Theory. The next chapter articulates the research design and methodology used in this study.

CHAPTER 3: RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter two focused on a review of existing literature of views on district leadership and the theoretical framework that underpins this study. This chapter focuses on details about how fieldwork was conducted. The chapter discusses the research design and methodology of this study and provides a justification for the methodological choices made for the data generation process. A qualitative research design was employed, which attempts to respond to the objectives articulated in chapter one by providing a deeper understanding of how district officials' leadership is received at school level. This was achieved through case study research conducted in the iLembe District of KwaZulu-Natal. This chapter also examines the research techniques that were employed during data generation and analysis. The trustworthiness and ethical considerations of this study are discussed towards the latter part of this chapter.

3.2 Research Paradigm – The Interpretivist Paradigm

When commencing with a research study, the choice of a particular paradigm is vital to the research as it dictates every decision that the researcher makes (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Bertram and Christiansen (2014) argue that adopting a particular paradigm informs the type of research questions chosen, what should be observed, how to collect data and how to understand the findings. According to Mackenzie and Knipe (2006), a paradigm elucidates on the researcher's understanding or set of beliefs that influences how the findings of a research are analysed. Furthermore, paradigms are a human construction that attempt to derive meaning from data (Denzin & Lincoln, 2000). Notably, researchers view it as a "lens" through which the world is viewed (Kivunja and Kuyini, 2017). A paradigm is therefore considered as an overarching framework that guides the course of a study, it further influences how researchers view, scrutinise, and explain their results.

This study adopts one of the dominant paradigms used in educational research – the interpretivist paradigm. Interpretivism has gained prominence over the years as researchers have seen that studying human participants is complex as they conduct and respond to situations differently. Therefore, interpretivism aims to understand the unique circumstances that informs certain situations in people's lives (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Chilisa & Kawulich, 2012; Maree, 2007). Ontology is associated with the "nature of reality" and this reality can be understood or measured empirically (Pretorius, 2024). Alharahsheh and Pius (2020) indicate that in the natural world, people are different from objects because they attach

their own meanings to things. Researchers who use this paradigm try to “get into the head of the participant” to understand the views of the participant and to see how he or she attaches meaning to the topic under examination (Kivunja & Kuyini, 2017). Interpretivism embraces constructivist ontology, whereby researchers accept social constructions through the meanings and experiences of participants (Schwandt et al., 2007). Further to this, interpretivism accepts “multiple realities” as experienced by different individuals (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Rehman & Alharthi, 2016). Additionally, the goal of interpretivism is to discover rich, in-depth understandings of a phenomenon. Certain conditions may vary, and this shapes how each person perceives the phenomenon (Bhattacharjee, 2012).

By adopting this lens, I was able to understand the leadership approaches that were adopted by district officials, as it is understood by the participants, in this case, principals and SMT members (Cohen et al., 2007; Yanow & Schwartz-Shea, 2011). Additionally, the experiences of the participants vary. Therefore, the interpretive paradigm attempts to understand individual participants experiences of how they receive district leadership. The researcher explored an individual’s reality by conversing with the individual, allowing the individual to reflect on his or her experience (Pretorius, 2024). Participants were asked questions and given a chance to reflect on their interactions with district officials.

Epistemology interrogates the “nature of knowledge and the processes through which we come to understand it” (Pretorius, 2024). Interpretivists subscribe to subjective epistemology whereby researchers believe that knowledge is created through how the world is interpreted and experienced (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Working within the interpretivist paradigm assumes that a person’s reality is viewed subjectively (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). The participants of this study shared varied views on how they experienced district officials’ leadership. However, the implication of this on data generation and analysis is that data will be difficult to generalise (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Counsell (2009) adds that working within the interpretivist paradigm can lead to meaningful data because it is based on an individual’s experience and considers the various factors that influences that experience. It is based on understanding the real experiences of individuals within their natural settings (Tuli, 2010). Our understanding of truth and reality is informed by how we interpret them (Rehman & Alharthi, 2016).

Axiology allows the researcher to consider the role she plays in the research and how her own “values, beliefs and biases” affect the study (Pretorius, 2024). In other words, the researcher

engages in a process of reflexivity. In this study, the researcher's own experience encouraged her to explore this area of research, thereby gaining much insight on the topic under investigation, contributing to a fuller, multi-dimensional understanding of the phenomena (Pretorius, 2024). Axiology is vital to ensure integrity and transparency in the study (Pretorius, 2024).

Additionally, the interpretivist paradigm adopts a methodological approach that allows the voices of the participants to be heard (Cole, 2006). In this study, principals and DHs shared their experiences through interviews.

3.3 Research Approach – Qualitative Research Approach

This study adopts a qualitative research approach, as it aims to understand the case or phenomenon by examining the experiences of participants (Stake, 2010). Qualitative research provides detailed and descriptive accounts on the phenomenon that is studied, this enables the researcher to acquire a rich understanding (Maree, 2007). In qualitative research the focus is on understanding participants' experiences and interpretations on how they view the world, rather than numbers (Mahajan, 2018). For this reason, researchers view individuals as participants and not objects (Tuli, 2010).

Qualitative research goes beyond describing what happens in certain situations. It explores inherent explanations and motivations, which can provide important insights on certain issues. This approach enables the researcher to gain a richer understanding of the phenomenon, which can assist the researcher to validate or refine their initial assumptions. Qualitative research can then inform possible suggestions or solutions to improve (Taylor et al., 2015). Additionally, it takes the form of words over numerals and is presented in a wide array of forms such as case studies, which is adopted by this study (Frey et al., 1992).

Researchers gather data by doing fieldwork. The research is conducted in an environment in which the participant is familiar, the natural setting (Keyton, 2001). Fieldwork consists of empirical observations and interviewing participants (Okely, 2002). Lincoln (1985) views the participant as "the human as the instrument", which is indicative of the intricate and multi-dimensional lives of people and their experiences. Additionally, the researcher acts as a participant. Participants are at liberty to discuss what he or she wishes to and are not prescribed by the researcher, the researcher documents the exchanges between himself, and the participant

and meaning is collaboratively constructed with the researcher and participant, the findings provide insight on social constructions, but it does not always contribute to the development of new theories. Data can include the participants' feelings, whether revealed implicitly or explicitly and new concepts can emerge (Chesebro & Borisoff, 2007). Additionally, the questions asked as part of qualitative studies attempt to explore a phenomenon based on the perspectives of the participants to derive data-rich responses. Researchers agree that questions should be open-ended, allowing participants to provide details of their experiences without any restrictions; if the researcher requires clarity on aspects that the participant shared, the researcher may probe for further details (Creswell, 2012; Merriam & Tisdell, 2015; Patton, 2014).

However, the findings cannot be generalised as few participants participate from different contexts, settings, and experiences (Ali & Yusof, 2011). Denzin and Lincoln (2018) and Creswell (2014) add that the qualitative research approach is important in education as it allows for the exploration of phenomena that cannot be explored by traditional methods of measurement, and by focusing on participants' experiences, the researcher can construct a comprehensive understanding of the phenomena being studied.

In this study, the participants were asked to share how they felt about working with district officials and to share examples of their working relationship that made them feel in that way. They were asked to describe district officials' leadership approaches by providing examples; how district officials' leadership approaches affect the way they manage their schools; sharing stories of how district support was helpful or unhelpful to their schools; whether SMTs are involved in making decisions for their schools. They were also asked to share whether the district does a good job of offering support to them as managers; what qualities a district leader should have; what aspect of district officials' leadership approaches they would choose to change and why; and to share a piece of advice for district officials on how to improve their leadership approaches. The open-endedness of the questions allows the participants to reflect on their views and experiences, which will provide an in-depth exploration of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014).

3.4 Research Design – Case Study Research

This study aims to examine the leadership approaches used by district officials in selected public schools in KwaZulu-Natal by using the case study approach. The primary objective of

this research study is to provide illumination by exploring how participants experience the phenomenon or case (Stake, 2010). A case study is defined as a phenomenon which occurs in participants' natural settings (Yin, 2009). Case study research involves the study of an individual example over a period of time, in real-life contemporary settings, which provides a holistic view of the phenomenon (Creswell, 2014; Rule & John, 2011). The use of several cases is studied at the same time to provide an in-depth understanding of the phenomenon (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). This study garners the perspectives of various personnel who are in the position of school management. They comprise of the principal and DHs who work directly with district officials.

Stake (2010) states that researchers should view cases and consider them as objects instead of processes as it is a unified system. However, Merriam (2009) adds the notion that a case can be considered a unit which has boundaries. In essence, a case is a situation or event which occurs within a specific setting that has limitations. In case study research, the researcher should be certain about the phenomenon that is to be investigated as well as the limitations, or boundaries in her investigation. She may select anything to be the case (Cibane, 2020). According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), case studies attempt to provide details on "what it is like" when placed in a specific situation and the details that are provided are recorded in the form a description (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

In this research the case is the principals and DHs who share their experiences about how they receive leadership from district officials and how this impacts on how they manage their schools. The schools within which they work constitutes the bound system. During the study, I attempt to accurately record the participants' actual experiences and views about a specific situation (Cohen et al., 2018). Considering this, the use of the case study was an appropriate choice for this research.

3.5 Selection of Site and Participants

According to Bertram and Christiansen (2014), sampling consists of the researcher making decisions about who to include in the study, under which conditions to conduct the study in and what actions or behaviours should be studied. Sharma (2017) adds that sampling is the process that involves making decisions about selecting places and people who will assist in meeting the research aims and objectives. Since this study has adopted the interpretivist approach, the data is not necessarily representative of the entire population, as the major

concern is to provide clear and comprehensive explanations and analysis (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). For this study, data was generated from three secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal.

Additionally, I used purposive and convenience sampling. For purposive sampling, a researcher selects participants because they possess specific characteristics that are applicable to the research study (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Purposive sampling is “subjective, judgemental and selective” (Cibane, 2020); therefore, it is commonly referred to as “judgement sampling” (Etikan et al., 2016; Polkinghorne, 2005; Tangco, 2007). The participants that were selected are experienced in and knowledgeable regarding a specific subject matter (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2007) and can provide valuable insights, which they express when they communicate and share their experiences (Bernard, 2002). The criterion used to select participants was that they should be part of the SMTs of their respective secondary schools, who work closely with district officials and be part of the iLembe District in KwaZulu-Natal.

The study also uses convenience sampling, which allows participants to be accessible to the researcher by being geographically proximate and show willingness to participate in the study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Etikan et al., 2016). Convenience sampling is also commonly referred to as “accidental sampling” as the participants are physically close to the researcher and are available to participate in the study (Etikan et al., 2016). However, convenience sampling does not represent the entire population and is biased (Etikan, et al, 2016). According to the principles of the interpretivist paradigm, it is not necessary for the entire population to be represented in the study as they were selected to share their unique experiences, which this study attempts to explore (Alharahsheh & Pius, 2020). Participants were selected based on convenience due to being within proximity of the researcher, allowing the researcher to travel shorter distances to conduct interviews.

When adopting a qualitative approach, the sample size is typically small (Polkinghorne, 2005; Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Small sample sizes are valuable as they allow the researcher to delve deep into the participants’ experiences to obtain an extensive understanding of the subject that is being investigated (Tagg, 1985). In addition, a small sample size enables the researcher to capture the richness of the data communicated by the participants (Ritchie & Lewis, 2003). Consequently, nine (9) participants were selected to be part of this study, who are members of their school’s SMT.

SMT members were selected as they are the first port of communication between the school and district. The principal was selected because he works directly with the various sections of the district such as the Examination and Assessment section, Teacher Development Section, Human Resource Section, Leave Section, Teaching and Learning Services, amongst others. Other SMT members were selected as they are DHs and engage with subject advisors (formally called Deputy Chief Education Specialists) from the district. Uhl-Bien (2006) posits that leadership is based on relationships that SMTs have with districts, their relationships attempt to delve into the social relationships they have because of the nature of communication that occurs. Furthermore, Lave and Wenger (1991) explains the concept of “community of practice” where SMT members and district officials work collaboratively for the benefit of the school. Their schools are places where they apply district directives and check whether there are positive results that stem from the directives (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The schools that were selected are secondary schools in the iLembe district. I have selected those schools as they are close to my place of employment, making them accessible. Furthermore, secondary schools were selected because I am employed in a secondary school and have some understanding of the relationships that SMTs have with district officials, which I would like to explore further to get a deeper understanding. Lave and Wenger (1991) explains the concept of “situated learning” where the researcher attempts to understand a phenomenon based on the settings in which participants find themselves. Secondary schools were selected as there is mounting pressure on them to produce results, coupled with the direct influence of districts. This reveals that they are highly complex and dynamic structures (Uhl-Bien, 2006).

The recruitment process consisted of identifying suitable schools using convenience and purposive sampling. This was followed by contacting the principals of these schools to gauge whether their schools would be willing to contribute towards this study. Once permission was granted by the principals, they were asked to suggest two DHs from different departments with differing years of experience. The DHs were then approached where a meeting was held about the study and the role they could play in it. When one-on-one meetings were held with DHs, principals were absent, eliminating feelings of them feeling compelled to participate in the study.

3.6 Semi-structured Interviews – A Data Generation Method

The use of interviews is a popular method to generate data when working within the

interpretivist paradigm. According to Kvale (2009) and Bertram and Christiansen (2014) interviews are organised conversations that have a specific goal. Additionally, Rubin and Rubin (2011) describe interviews as “conversational partnerships.” Interviews seek to collect specific information and having questions answered (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The researcher can examine the participant’s perspectives to understand the phenomenon in greater depth (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Before the data generation phase commenced, schools and SMT members were selected. The principals from the respective schools were selected and the available DHs were then selected. Out of the three-original selection of schools, one school did not respond to my request of conducting the interviews there, even after numerous phone calls and emails. To navigate this challenge, I selected another school whose SMT members were willing to be part of the study. Upon the first meeting with participants, I explained who I was, what my study was about and how I would collect data from them. I also answered questions that they had and scheduled interviews. Consent forms were issued to them during the first meeting and was collected prior to the interviews.

Moreover, the primary data generation method for this study is semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews allow the researcher to construct meaning of how people perceive their world (Karatsareas, 2022). By conducting one-on-one interviews, the researcher can also observe participants’ feelings and other non-verbal cues (Cohen et al., 2007). Furthermore, according to Roulston and Choi (2018), to gain an understanding of how educational institutions operate, the people who work in such institutions must be understood first and this can be done best talking to those people. Semi-structured interviews provide for open-endedness, exploration and flexibility when interviewing participants (Merriam, 2009). In this way, researchers are not confined to the interview schedule and can delve deeper into significant issues. It is for this reason that I have selected semi-structured interviews as a method of data collection for this research study.

Interviewing is an interactive process between the researcher and participant, which requires both parties to communicate interpersonally. However, this can also influence how the participant answers the questions due to the power relationship that exists between the researcher and participant (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Bertram and Christiansen (2014) iterate that to prevent the effect of power relations on the participant’s responses, the authors suggest that it would be best if the researcher is an outsider. For this reason, I will be conducting the interviews as an outsider.

Subject to participants' availability, the interviews were conducted during the school day for some SMT members, and after school for others. For the interviews that were conducted during the school day, I had to take a short leave of absence from my place of employment to conduct the interview, for this reason, convenience sampling was especially beneficial. All interviews were conducted on the school premises. The interviews with principals took place in their offices and interviews with DH's either took place in their offices or in available boardrooms or classrooms. Before the commencement of each interview, I reminded the participant about what they consented to, including that the interviews would be recorded. Some of them were nervous and apprehensive to share their experiences. However, I assured them that their responses would remain confidential without revealing their names or any names that they mentioned. This made them feel at ease. An interview schedule was used to guide the direction of the interview. However, at some points, I had to probe for more details. Bertram and Christiansen (2014) add that during interviews, the researcher can probe and ask for clarifications.

Additionally, some DHs have been appointed in acting positions for a short period of time and were reluctant to provide too many details, some of their responses were vague and did not give a comprehensive view of their experiences, possibly due to their limited interactions with district officials. However, principals and other DHs who had occupied their positions for several years, provided much insight. Each interview took about 45 minutes to an hour. All participants were interviewed once.

3.7 Data Analysis

Data analysis is a process that involves using techniques that makes meaning from the data that was collected, it involves combining, synthesising, and analysing the responses of the participants (Merriam, 2009). This study uses both a deductive and inductive approach to data analysis (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014). The deductive approach utilises an existing theory and this theory is tested against the data generated, whereas the inductive approach is viewed as collecting specific data and then deriving meaning from the data (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Kumar & Ujire, 2024). For the deductive approach, I began by formulating the research questions that guide the study. This was followed by reading literature regarding the phenomena I investigated and then I found a suitable theoretical framework to underpin the study. Subsequently, data was generated and analysed (Kumar & Ujire, 2024).

Contrastingly, for the inductive approach, I began by gaining insight into the phenomena by interviewing the participants and audio-recording their responses. Once the data was generated, the audio-records were transcribed using the transcription function on Microsoft Word. The transcription was then checked by listening to the audio-recording, together with the transcription that Microsoft Word produced. Some lapses were found on the transcription files. However, this was corrected during the checking process.

Thematic analysis was utilised as a framework for conducting the analysis. I began by familiarising and immersing myself in the data by examining the interview transcripts (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Then the interview transcripts were organised in a tabular format and similar occurrences were grouped together, by using codes to form categories. Stake (1995) calls this “categorical aggregation” (Braun & Clarke, 2013; McMillan & Schumacher, 1993). At this point, initial themes were created based on the patterns that emerged from the data. I then determined whether the themes provided a convincing exploration of the data that was collected. The themes were reviewed, and previous sections of the study were adapted and developed, including the theoretical framework based on the findings from the data generation stage (Maguire & Delahunt, 2017). Additionally, the use of the theoretical framework that was selected for this study assisted in making sense of the data that was collected (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). In this study, data analysis was conducted to understand how SMT members construed leadership received from district officials and then patterns emerged from their responses during the data generation process.

The findings are presented using “thick descriptions” where the researcher presents sufficient details so the reader can assess whether the findings are applicable in other contexts. This is referred to as “naturalistic generalisations” (Creswell, 2014). Generalising may be difficult in this study as I used case study research, which is distinctive and has depth (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). I will present that data using quotes and narratives of participants to give a voice to participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

3.8 Trustworthiness of the Research

A qualitative study must satisfy trustworthiness checks to be declared valid (Shenton, 2004). Lincoln (1985) posits that when the findings of the study correctly reflect the meanings that participants have articulated during the data collection process, then trustworthiness is achieved. Aspects of trustworthiness include credibility, transferability, dependability, and

confirmability, and I will discuss how each aspect was achieved in this study.

3.8.1 Credibility

Credibility is defined as a measure to assess the precision of the findings, this is done by spending time in the field and by providing detailed descriptions of participants' responses (Creswell, 2014; Denzin, 1989). To establish credibility, I have audio-recorded the participants responses, ensuring accuracy in the production of the interview transcripts (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Secondly, I assured the participants that their names, or the names of their schools would not be identifiable as pseudonyms would be used, this made them feel at ease and many freely spoke about their experiences and views (Ndaba, 2021). I have minimised the extent to which the findings of this study are indicative of my own biases. Instead, I have focused on the meanings that were created by the participants (Guba, 1981). I used multiple participants, I interviewed participants from various management positions, namely principals and DHs, who experienced different degrees of district-level leadership. The findings were presented in the form of "thick" descriptions, which provides the reader with a first-hand account of the participant's views and experiences (Denzin, 1994). This was done to establish the authenticity of the findings.

3.8.2 Transferability

Transferability refers to the degree to which the findings of a study can be applied to other contexts (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Polit & Beck, 2010). Like the arguments presented under credibility, providing of in-depth and nuanced descriptions, enables the reader to determine whether the findings of this study can be transferred to similar situations (Erlandson, 1993). This study provides much detail about the number of schools and participants that were selected, where they are situated, how the data was generated, the various questions that participants were asked, the duration of the interview sessions and the various challenges that were experienced during the data generation process. This provides the reader with sufficient background details to determine whether the takeaways from this study can be applied elsewhere (Ndaba, 2021).

3.8.3 Dependability

Lincoln (1985) explains that dependability is the act of checking the stability of the findings. This is done by presenting the reader with sufficient details about the data generation and analysis procedures, such that if the study was conducted under similar conditions with similar

participants, the findings would be consistent. In this research the data generation and analysis procedures were clearly outlined and evaluated for bias or inaccuracies, which shows transparency and reflexivity (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014; Guba, 1981). Bertram and Christiansen (2014) and Guba (1981) further add that dependability also includes using technological devices or people to check on the authenticity of participants responses, which they refer to as an “audit trail”. In this study I have used an audio-recorder to document the participants responses. If any lapses in clarity were identified, I checked the audio-recording. Additionally, I also asked an individual to proof-read the interview transcriptions against the audio-recordings and check for inaccuracies. Furthermore, I worked with my supervisor who guided me throughout the research process, which is what Guba (1981) refers to as “peer review”. Furthermore, the data will be stored at the university for a period of five years, should other researchers wish to refer to it (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). This ensures that the research is reliable.

3.8.4 Confirmability

Confirmability is the process of ensuring that the findings of the research are valid (Lincoln, 1985). Ahmed (2024) adds that it is a technique to ensure that the research is free from bias or distortions. It should ensure that the research reports on the participants experiences and opinions, and not the researcher’s (Lincoln, 1985). The findings are based on the evidence provided by the participants as “thick, rich descriptions” (Patton, 2014). This study reports the findings using verbatim quotes as shared by the participants. The findings are reported in a narrative format and provides rich descriptions of the participants experiences. Confirmability can also be achieved by having an “audit trail” which records the research process, such as participant responses and analysis (Lincoln, 1985). It also comprises of reflexivity, allowing the researcher to reflect on her role to minimise bias (Berger, 2015). My supervisor also contributed to this through a supervisory review to ensure the authentication of the findings and that the research process was free of bias.

3.9 Ethical Considerations

Ethics is an element of research which comprises right and wrong behaviour which is measured against established guidelines when conducting research (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024; Hasan et al., 2021). If research is not conducted while maintaining ethical guidelines, it may impact on participants “psychologically, socially and economically” and having an overall impact on the validity of the findings (Badampudi et al., 2022). Therefore, the researcher evaluates risks that

may affect the study before engaging in research and tries to minimise these risks, committing to “do no harm” to the participants (Badampudi et al., 2022; Cilliers & Viljoen, 2021). During the study, the researcher must protect the participants’ rights, allowing them to feel safe by creating an environment where they can freely express themselves (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). The following ethical principles were applied during the study:

3.9.1 Informed Consent and Voluntary Participation

Before I began fieldwork, I obtained approval from the Head of Department of the Department of Education, KwaZulu-Natal, to conduct research at selected schools. This letter was forwarded to the iLembe District Director and the Circuit Manager, where I conducted the research. Ethical clearance from the University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Research Committee was granted. Ethical guidelines from the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education and the University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethics Committee have been adhered to during the study. I then wrote to selected school principals, using an information sheet, where I presented a summary of the study, detailing how the participants would be involved during the data generation stage (Saunders et al., 2016). I then requested the principal to grant me permission to conduct research at their institutions in the form of an approval letter. Upon receipt of the approval letter from each school, I proceeded to meet and obtain the consent of the participants. During the meetings with the participants, I presented the information sheet to them and proceeded to obtain their consent for their participation in the study (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). They were requested to fill in a consent form and indicate what aspects of the study they were consenting to. They were provided with the opportunity to ask questions or share concerns. The participants were afforded time to consider their participation in this study. They were then requested to complete and return the consent form. Additionally, I emphasised to them that their participation was voluntary, and that they may withdraw at any time without any penalty (Kemmis et al., 2014; Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023).

3.9.2 Anonymity, Privacy and Confidentiality

Anonymity comprises of disguising personal details about a participant or institutions such that they would not be recognised (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024; Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). Anonymity is maintained to allow participants the freedom to share information which enhances the reliability of the findings and the integrity of the study (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024; Saunders et al., 2015). Furthermore, privacy and confidentiality are maintained to ensure that an external individual does not have access to the information shared by the participant in the

form of data (Nii Laryeafio & Ogbewe, 2023). In this study, I assured the participants that I will maintain anonymity and confidentiality by using pseudonyms, safeguarding both the individual's and their institution's identities (Kemmis et al., 2014). Moreover, I explained that I will be audio-recording and transcribing their responses, which will be stored and locked away for a period of five years, which will thereafter be deleted and destroyed. When participants are assured of the privacy and confidentiality, they were able to share insightful and accurate information (Haneef & Agrawal, 2024). Additionally, the schools and participants were anonymised separately through the use of pseudonyms. However, the district is identified as the iLembe District as it provides a contextual basis for this study.

3.10 Limitations and Delimitations

Limitations are considered as shortcomings, hindrances, actions, and influences that the researcher cannot control during the study (Fetzer, 2022; Malakar, 2022). During this study, time was a factor of limitation, a small sample size was used, I had limited access to schools and participants may not have been completely honest during the interviews. Delimitations are the aspects that the researcher can control by being aware of the scope and working within specific parameters of the study (Fetzer, 2022; Malakar, 2022). For this study, I chose to focus on five main leadership approaches practiced in education, which are: bureaucratic, instructional, distributed, servant, and transformational, I also focused on secondary schools situated in one district, selecting SMT members as participants.

3.11 Chapter Summary

This chapter discussed the research design and methodology of this study and provides a justification of each research decision that was made. The study adopted the interpretivist paradigm, which is closely linked to the qualitative research approach. Case study was used, which attempted to explore the unique situations that SMTs experience with district officials by providing a clearer understanding on how district officials leadership is received at school level. This chapter also examined the research techniques that were employed during data generation and analysis. Trustworthiness, comprising of credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability was applicable to this study, to ensure reliability and confirmability. Lastly, the ethical considerations, consisting of voluntary participation and confidentiality of this study was discussed.

CHAPTER 4: PRESENTATION AND DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

4.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter discussed the research design and methodology that was used in this study. This chapter explores the findings and analysis from the data that was generated through interviews. As a reminder to the reader, the study is entitled “*Leadership approaches adopted by district officials and their effect on the management of schools – a case study of secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal*” and the findings and discussion are based on the following research questions:

1. How do principals and SMT members perceive the leadership approaches adopted by district officials when working with schools?
2. How do district officials’ leadership approaches, as experienced by SMT members, affect school management?
3. How can district officials’ leadership approaches be strengthened, based on SMT members’ experiences, to positively influence school management?

Additionally, during the analysis of the data Transformational Leadership Theory was used as an interpretive lens. The theory attempted to make sense of specific aspects of district leadership as data was derived from the participants. Moreover, when data was either consistent or inconsistent with theory, it was also noted. The sections in this chapter are not distinct and the reader may find that there are overlaps between various sections. Furthermore, this chapter contains the direct quotes of the participants to give voices to their experiences.

4.2 Profiling the Participants

The participants were selected from three schools in the iLembe District and comprised of the principal and two Departmental Heads from each school. Pseudonyms have been used to protect the identities of the participants.

Name of Participant	Role in the School	Number of Years Teaching	Number of Years in Current Position
Mr Dlamini	Principal – School A	22 years	6 years
Mr Singh	Principal – School B	39 years	8 years
Mr Mkhize	Principal – School C	19 years	2 years
Mr Khumalo	Departmental Head	5 years	3 years

Ms Ndlovu	Departmental Head	13 years	3 years
Mr Mthembu	Departmental Head	6 years	1 year
Ms Dass	Departmental Head	24 years	8 months
Ms Nkosi	Departmental Head	22 years	3 years
Mr Maharaj	Departmental Head	18 years	2 years

4.3 Approaches to Leadership Adopted by District Officials

This section responds to the first research question. The responses contained here are the experiences shared by principals and DHs in their capacities as members of the SMT. This section explores how principals and SMTs experience leadership from district officials. The descriptions articulated by the participants may differ from the characteristics and features of the leadership approaches outlined in Chapter 2. The descriptions are communicated in practical language as it is experienced. The approaches include deploying a policy-driven approach to leadership; instruction focused approach leadership; supportive leadership; collaborative leadership.

4.3.1 Policy-Driven Approach to Leadership

The data generated through interviews show that according to the school stakeholders who participated in the study, district officials adhere strongly to policies that govern the Department of Basic Education. According to the participants, when there were complex school issues that needed to be dealt with, the district referred the SMT to policy. From the participants responses, it came out that schools were also expected to comply with policies which informed their practices. Mr Mkhize, principal of School C, said this about the district officials, *“They are policy driven and are guided by policy when making decisions.”*. Sharing similar sentiments with Mr Mkhize, principal of School A, Mr Dlamini explained that his circuit manager applies policy when dealing with matters. Mr Dlamini explained, *“When we have discipline issues, he (the circuit manager) always makes sure he follows policy in solving issues.”*

While speaking on leadership based on policy, the participants suggested that district officials also seem to be subjected to policy adherence when conducting their work, enforcing compliance on their SMT counterparts. The adherence to policy has practical implications which is demonstrated when district officials call SMTs to meetings that require their instant compliance through their attendance or by ensuring that specific documents are present. Mr Khumalo and Ms Ndlovu, who are DHs, respectively said:

Sometimes, they will call meetings and want things immediately without checking if we are teaching. They are driven by their schedules and compliance requirements, and that compromises teaching and learning. **(Mr Khumalo)**

When they come for moderation, they follow all the policies and check every file, every book, every learner's work. It forces us to comply, which is good, but sometimes it feels like ticking boxes more than helping us improve. **(Ms Ndlovu)**

From the data, it is noted that principals shared an understanding of how district officials are policy driven, as principals themselves implement policies in their schools. This differs slightly from the views of DHs who emphasise how they are required to comply with directives and policy. Furthermore, from the data it emerged that district officials apply a policy-driven approach in guiding the actions of SMTs by informing them of existing procedures and regulations. Within school contexts, district officials limit the extent to which policies can be adapted to cater for varying contextual factors as district officials expect SMTs to apply policies as they are. Mr Mthembu, a DH said, *"We are told what to do in line with policy, but there are times when schools have unique challenges and there's no room for flexibility. Even when we propose alternatives, they insist on the same procedures."* While the work of districts and SMTs are guided by policy and may be viewed as rigid, when there are opportunities to consult on policy matters, district does make some allowances. In this regard, Mr Mkhize, principal of School C and Mr Singh, principal of School B, respectively said:

For some decisions, they (the district officials) may not have power over, it's a policy thing. It might be a decision they are embarking on because it has already been taken by head office. **(Mr Mkhize)**

If it's a national policy, it comes in via circular from national government or from the provincial department... On some issues there is consultation, where you engage and you suggest, what is feasible is accommodated, on other issues it might come in as a clear instruction. I do understand though that in terms of the way it is operating these days, you do first and you question later. **(Mr Singh)**

District officials subscribe to leadership embedded in policy. They do not necessarily have authority, but they advance policy in schools (Lamm et al., 2019). This can be seen from the participants' responses where policies are followed from circulars and through meetings that take place between districts and school management. Similar findings are consistent with Sections 2.5.1.1 and 2.5.1.2 of Chapter 2, which states that district leadership is predominantly attributed to policy-focused leadership by districts enforcing schools to comply with decisions taken by higher authority structures, resulting in SMTs being viewed as "instruction takers" (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Khan et al., 2021; Steyn & Fuller, 2024). These accounts suggest that district officials resort to bureaucratic and autocratic approaches to ensure that SMTs

comply with policies and decisions. The participants revealed that when SMTs are faced with intricate issues, district officials referred them to policy to guide their work and the decisions they made. In the same way, district officials themselves rely on established procedures and regulations to govern their work with schools. Supporting the participants' responses, Pont (2020) reiterates that policies forefront compliance and accountability, which ultimately affects school leadership. While Pont (2020) indicates that policy driven leadership yields positive effects by eliciting collaboration and distributing leadership, the participants from this study viewed this approach as stifling and rigid. Participants also shared that inflexibility and non-developmental nature are a result of such an approach. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) and Steyn and Fuller (2024) found that although district sets specific goals for their districts, policy conformity and other system constraints hinder them from offering support that caters to specific contexts. Additionally, the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) further mandates districts to ensure that schools comply with policy promoting uniformity and accountability throughout the district and is further emphasised by the participants. According to the transformational leadership theory in Chapter 2, the responses from the participants do not align with the dimensions laid out by Bass and Avolio (1994) pertaining to “inspirational motivation” and “individual consideration.” While the transformational leadership approach champions innovation and consideration of the individual needs of schools, participant responses contrastingly experience district leadership as being limiting and focused on compliance, minimising innovation and the extent to which policies can be adapted to contextual factors. What emerges here is that autocratic and bureaucratic tendencies are limiting and do not tie in with transformation.

4.3.2 Instruction-Focused Approach to Leadership

From the interviews, it was revealed that the work of district officials is primarily concerned with promoting teaching and learning in schools and offering the requisite support to enable this process. It was shown that district officials play an active role in ensuring effective teaching and learning takes place in schools. In their capacities as subject advisors, they ensure that SMTs and teachers understand the curriculum and subsequent lesson planning and assessment as the focus is on improving learner performance. It emerged that teachers are further guided on improving their instruction. Mr Mkhize, principal of School A, shared, “*Subject advisors are willing to work with us and share information. They say, ‘Look, these are my people, my subject, this is how I can assist you to make sure your school does well.’*” Mr Mthembu, a DH added, “*They are so helpful whenever we need help, they try by all means to make sure that they try to meet our needs to help learners pass.*”

From the participants' responses, it was evident that subject advisors are readily available to assist DHs and teachers to provide immediate support and guidance. Most DHs contributed positively when they described the leadership they received from their subject advisors as subject advisors work closely with DHs in executing the curriculum. Subject advisors are seen as specialists in their subjects and provide valuable insight in overcoming disparities. Mr Khumalo, a DH, said, *"My subject advisor was just here yesterday, he does assist by teaching. If we need help for our subject, we call him, and he comes."* Ms Ndlovu, a DH shared, *"The subject advisor comes into class and assists with teaching. We learned a lot from her, she is always available to assist."* Mr Maharaj, a DH explained, *"They (the subject advisors) visit classes and help teachers see where they are going wrong."* Mr Mthembu, a DH, said, *"They (the subject advisors) check learners' books and moderate assessments. After that, he gives feedback on how to improve teaching."* Ms Ndlovu, a DH, added, *"I feel privileged working with the subject advisor because it's easy for me to access information about my subject."*

Mr Mkhize, principal of School C, Ms Nkosi and Ms Dass, who are both DHs respectively said:

If a school is underperforming in a subject, the subject advisor goes there to empower the teacher, put in a lead teacher, train the teacher, and even teach themselves. **(Mr Mkhize)**

My subject advisor always makes sure that everything is in order, and we have everything we need to improve results. In the first year of introducing Economics, our pass rate was 90% because of the subject advisor's support. **(Ms Nkosi)**

My subject advisor has been here for many years and has contributed to Geography to a great extent. He is always here whenever we need help, he will come to school to assist us. **(Ms Dass)**

The interviews revealed that district officials are curriculum-focused and engage with schools to improve the quality of teaching, learning and assessment. It emerged that district officials are specialists in curriculum-related matters; they are practical, visible, and empowering. Based on the participants' views, particularly the DHs, there was overall positivity and agreement that subject advisors supported and guided them on their instructional practices, which was found to equip them in their roles by making them more knowledgeable and competent on instruction-related matters. This can be attributed to the close and direct relationship that they have since DHs are purveyors of the curriculum. The responses from the participants are corroborated in literature by Bush and Glover (2014) and Hallinger (2011) which emphasise that instructional leadership is based on teaching and learning initiatives and developing those involved in this process. Additionally, the participants responses align to Section 2.5.2.1 of Chapter 2 as well

as the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), which stipulates that district officials are mandated to “improve educational access, give management and professional support, and help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching.” Participants stated that in addition to district officials providing guidance, they were also active and engaged in classrooms and assessment-related tasks. According to Leithwood (2021) and Mestry (2017), district officials’ visibility in schools and their specialist guidance on curriculum matters contributes to subject and school improvement.

Moreover, the participants responses align to the dimensions of the transformational leadership theory (Bass and Avolio, 1994). The findings are related to the “individual consideration” dimension, which emphasises that district officials are concerned with what SMTs and teachers do in schools, particularly in the teaching-learning arena (Khan et al., 2022). By operating in this dimension, district officials listen to the challenges experienced by DHs and teachers and then provide the necessary skills to mitigate these challenges to achieve better results (Greiman et al., 2007; Shava & Heystek, 2021). In their instructional leadership capacities, district officials are identified as mentors (Ariokiasamy et al., 2016). Additionally, when “individual consideration” is applied, SMTs are developed and empowered. The “intellectual stimulation” dimension of the transformational leadership theory can also be applied here where district officials encourage SMTs to reflect on current practices and then apply innovative techniques to improve these practices. This is particularly important on the teaching-learning front (Cibane, 2020). To an extent, “idealised influence,” another dimension of the transformational leadership theory, is also practiced. This is where district officials model positive behaviours and teaching methodologies which influence SMTs and teachers to adopt the same (Cibane, 2020). While the transformational leadership theory provides a framework that guides leadership, it does not fully support the technicality of executing curriculum – instructional leadership fills this space. The participants show that the district officials with whom they work are specialists in their respective subjects and have extensive knowledge on assessment and content, therefore there should be integration of the transformational leadership theory as well as the instructional approach to leadership.

4.3.3 Supportive Leadership

The interviews showed that district officials were ready to offer support in whichever way the support was required by SMTs. It transpired that district officials were willing to extend their support and help SMTs find solutions to their challenges once they became aware of the challenges and contexts that affected SMTs. According to the participants, district officials

pledged their support to SMTs and sometimes went to great lengths to show their support. Principal of School A, Mr Dlamini, said, *“The circuit manager’s approach is hands-on. Whenever I have an issue, he is there and can see the practicality of what I’m talking about.”* Mr Mkhize, principal of School C affirmed Mr Dlamini’s view by stating, *“District officials have become more practical to improve results and are now in touch with what is happening in schools.”* Sharing a similar view, Mr Singh, principal of School B stated, *“The acting circuit manager listens with a sympathetic ear. He can identify with what we are going through.”* From the perspective of a DH, Ms Dass shared, *“He (the subject advisor) will make a plan. He will go to other schools, borrow resources if he needs to and bring it to us. We have that kind of support.”* Mr Dlamini, principal of School A added, *“The nutrition section official always says, ‘I’m here to support, not to find faults.’ That’s why I can freely share challenges with him.”*

Both DHs and principals agreed that they received support from district officials. Furthermore, district officials reassured SMTs amidst challenging situations which was especially important for newly appointed SMT members. The participants shared, *“They don’t come to judge but to assist. They ask how far you have gone and how they can intervene which makes it easy for us to work with them”* **(Mr Mthembu)**. *“They district called all newly appointed DHs, DPs and principals to make sure that they hold our hands by making sure that whatever we do goes smoothly and that was helpful”* **(Ms Nkosi)**. *“They emphasise that they are here to assist, which is good. We shouldn’t be afraid of them; we must have access to them.”* **(Mr Khumalo)**. *“I’m happy to work with district officials especially when I know my appeals are being supported and represented at a higher level”* **(Mr Singh)**.

As another dimension to the support given by district officials to SMTs, the participants shared that district support was developmental and empowering which also encouraged them to adopt similar supportive strategies as demonstrated by district officials. Some participants stated:

I took up the responsibility of exams and did not know much. District officials came here and helped us, they showed us what to do and everything went well. Subject advisors are always here and willing to help. They are always there to give us more information and guide us. Even though their support is not 100% they are trying their best. **(Ms Nkosi)**

When I came in as a principal, my journey relied heavily on them in making me knowledgeable, capacitating me and seeing that I was on the right path. **(Mr Singh)**

The way they lead encourages me to be a better leader. I always make sure I practice whatever strategies they use with us. **(Ms Ndlovu)**

From the participants’ responses, it is evident that many district officials support SMTs by assisting them and listening to their concerns. Therefore, they are portrayed as being hands-on

in assisting schools with challenges. Employing a supportive approach to leadership is grounded in the creation of a safe space and open communication which encourages SMTs to share their problems and challenges and eliciting the support and assistance from district officials. Similar findings align with Sections 2.5.2.2 of Chapter 2, which places district officials as leaders who Lead from the Middle (LftM) and are strategically positioned to lend support to schools (Bush & Glover, 2014; Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015; Steyn & Fuller, 2024). This is also consistent with literature by Kainde and Mandagi (2023) which highlights that district officials are responsible for creating a trusting environment that supports communication. District officials also listen to their SMTs, try to understand their challenges and “create an inclusive and transparent work environment.” (Bavik, 2020). Additionally, the supportive approach to leadership is indicative of district officials showing their commitment and duty towards improving schools (Day et al., 2020). Moreover, the support garnered from district is empowering to SMTs especially when they were new to their roles. This notion is consistent with literature by Fauzi (2016), Kainde and Mandagi (2023), Leithwood and Jantzi (2005) and Hallinger (2011) which stresses that guiding and supporting people contributes to their growth and empowerment, also a tenet of servant leadership. Adopting a supportive approach to leadership contributes to effective communication, instilling trust and confidence and promoting growth which is directed to improving schools.

The findings from this study align with the transformational leadership theory (Bass & Avolio, 1994) and in this case “individual consideration” is practiced when district officials are cognisant of an individual school’s needs and challenges which enables district officials to find context-based solutions (Bass & Reggio, 2006). Furthermore, “inspirational motivation” is applied when district officials encourage and motivate SMTs to persevere through the challenges they face. Characteristics adopted by district officials which assure SMTs of their support leads to the “idealised influence” and is enacted when district officials exemplify humility and integrity (Bush, 2020), which influence SMTs, as leaders, to inculcate a supportive leadership approach. These accounts also suggest that servant leadership is practiced, which focuses on care, empathy and listening. However, the tension that emerges here is whether district officials have the knowledge, skills and capacity to adequately support SMTs. The question also arises whether district officials’ mere listening to the concerns of SMTs are sufficient in bringing about practical changes.

4.3.4 Collaborative Leadership

From the interviews, it was clear that district officials demonstrate some degree of collaboration

in finding out how they can assist SMTs. It showed that when opportunities arise, district officials engage with SMTs to arrive at decisions. In this way, SMTs are encouraged to be open and transparent. Furthermore, engaging and collaborating with participants in decision-making reduces the imposition of rules and regulations by promoting teamwork and inclusivity. Mr Singh, principal of School B said, *“The acting circuit manager would often call in at school or I would call on him when there are issues for attention.”* Attesting to this view, Mr Khumalo, a DH and Mr Dlamini, principal of School A respectively said:

Most of the time, they (the district officials) focus on the subjects that are not performing well so they call us to share our observations and they ask us for solutions. When they come to assist us, they first ask us how they can assist. **(Mr Khumalo)**

They assist a lot. I'm able to share critical information with them. I don't feel belittled when engaging with them. Their approach allows me to be open. They are open and are ready to help me. They don't act like bosses but like officials and workmates. **(Mr Dlamini)**

Furthermore, Mr Khumalo, a DH, stated, *“They first ask us what we need to be assisted with...they don't just impose things, they check with us first.”* Mr Mkhize, principal of School C added, *“They don't just force a decision on us, they deliberate. It is teamwork.”*

In contrast, some participants shared that the collaborative approach is not always utilised. Mr Singh, principal of School B shared, *“On some issues there is consultation, where we engage.”* Adding to this, Mr Mthembu, a DH, shared, *“Some decisions are made by the department and are uncontested but sometimes we can discuss and share views on certain matters.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH said, *“Sometimes they (district officials) do consult. They gather information and evidence that leads to a decision. When we can assist, it makes us feel like we are part of the decision-making process.”* Affirming this view, Ms Nkosi, a DH, shared, *“Sometimes they use the democratic approach, which allows us to participate in decisions.”*

Additionally, collaboration is grounded in two-way communication, allowing SMTs to share information with the district from their perspectives and allowing districts to guide and assist SMTs based on what SMTs have shared with them. Furthermore, district officials have extensive knowledge on instructional and management related matters, since they work with several schools from a variety of contexts. Tapping into the reservoirs of knowledgeable others, they provide guidance for SMTs in their various portfolios. Mr Mkhize, principal of School C said,

District officials are specialists because they deal with all schools in the district. Sometimes I have a narrow perspective because of my limited environment. Sometimes

I may think a challenge is new, but district officials would already have a solution for that. **(Mr Mkhize)**

Mr Singh, a principal, shared this about his engagements with his circuit manager, *“He (the circuit manager) has first-hand knowledge. I do appreciate his attitude in approaching us as principals. Mr Mkhize, principal of School C, maintained, “When they call principal meetings to improve on certain decisions, they give us the platform to engage because we understand our schools. They don’t enforce decisions, they deliberate. We work as a team and if they have more insight they will present it to us.” Mr Maharaj, a DH, shared a similar sentiment, “They are professional and know what they are doing. They have a lot of knowledge.”*

The findings from the interviews suggest a distributed leadership with an emphasis on collaboration and communication (Harris, 2013; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2005). It is evident from the responses that districts collaborate with SMTs to arrive at decisions. For this to happen, there must be effective communication channels in place. This also aligns to the tenets of servant leadership which emphasises collaboration and communication at various levels to achieve envisaged goals (Langhof & Güldenber, 2020). District engagement with SMTs show that they value SMTs inputs on matters and at the same time, promoting teamwork and collective responsibility. The participants’ responses are consistent with Section 2.5.3 which highlights that the collaborative approach to leadership is intertwined with distributed and democratic leadership principles (Akyürek & Akkoyun, 2024; Harris et al., 2022). Spillane (2005) postulates that leadership is the responsibility of several individuals to achieve a common goal. The collaborative approach allows for the improvement of schools through multiple-stakeholder involvement in problem-solving (Burton et al., 2017). These findings also align to Bantwini and Moorosi’s (2017) study which highlighted that when schools and districts collaborate, they are equipped to deal with contextual challenges. Furthermore, open lines of communication foster a level of trust between SMTs and district officials. This finding is in keeping with Leithwood and Jantzi’s (2005) study which found improvement commitment and cohesion when collaboration was practiced.

The collaborative approach to leadership can be aligned to the transformational leadership theory and is consistent with the dimension of “idealised influence”, which promotes a sense of unity between the district and schools; “intellectual stimulation” promotes applying innovative strategies to solve problems and “individual consideration” shows that districts place value on the concerns and challenges of individual schools. Participants shared that the degree to which collaboration is practiced is dependent on the individual’s leadership approach and whether there are opportunities for districts to consult with SMTs and whether the collective agreements

reached from the collaborative processes can be followed and applied. Therefore, the transformational leadership theory, the distributed and servant leadership approaches work in tandem. However, one tension that arises here is how frequently district officials collaborate with principals and SMTs and the nature of the concerns that requires collaboration. Collaboration should not be an exercise to promote inclusivity amongst district and schools. However, it should be acknowledged for the potential it carries in bringing about transformation.

4.4 The Effects of Leadership Approaches on School Management

This section responds to the second research question. The intention is to elucidate on the effects of the leadership approaches adopted by district officials on school management. The responses contained herein are the experiences shared by principals and DHs in their capacities as members of the SMT. The engagement with participants revealed the different approaches to leadership that were adopted by district officials affected different areas of management within the school. The effects of the leadership approaches are discussed under the following themes: accountability and organisational discipline; curriculum and instructional management; capacity building and communication and collaboration.

4.4.1 Accountability and Organisational Discipline

The interviews revealed that when district officials followed a policy driven approach to leadership, it contributed to increased accountability and discipline within the school. Districts recognised SMTs as accountability structures within the school and therefore allowed them some freedom in how they managed their schools. From the participants' responses, it was clear that SMTs were more consistent in complying with policies and measures set out by the district. Mr Mthembu, a DH said, *"In terms of how we manage the school, the principal is the accounting officer and district allows them to be accountable and manage the school in their own way."* Ms Dass, a DH stated, *"The district makes sure that we are accountable for the results that learners achieve, this helps in making sure everyone is on track with what they need to do."* Adding to this sentiment, Ms Nkosi, a DH stated, *"They (district officials) makes sure that we are accountable for everything that happens in our school because they account to their superiors. When they come for accountability sessions, they make sure that we have the things we need, this ensures that we do what is expected to maintain order."*

Both DHs and principals indicated that they were held accountable by the district. It also

emerged that when SMTs experience pressure to comply with the district's timeframes, it sometimes forces SMTs to produce sub-standard work, which does not always benefit the school. Mr Dlamini, principal of School A added, *"Because of the timeframes they give us, we find ourselves pressed to produce documents that we are not happy with. We rush and produce things for compliance. Whether it works for your school or not, they don't care, they just want submission."* However, Mr Dlamini further added, *"The meetings that districts have with us are information sharing. They tell us what to do but there's little room to question or adapt."* Ms Ndlovu, a DH said, *"When we have to comply with the district it is tiring because they give us a lot of work to do within a short space of time."*

In addition, the pressure and lack of organisation on the part of the district, disrupts the operations of the school. Mr Dlamini, a principal of School A and Ms Nkosi, a DH respectively said:

The district demands a year calendar from my school in January...sometimes we get a notice on a Monday for something happening on a Thursday. We have to abandon our school programmes and go to their programmes. This affects us a lot. **(Mr Dlamini)**

Last year we were an underperforming school...suddenly all our SMT members were called by the District Director. We had to leave everything – no SMT member was at school. This affected the operation of the school. **(Ms Nkosi)**

Contrasting to this, a participant shared a positive experience that affected school management when districts applied policy and expected compliance. Mr Mkhize, principal of School C said, *"There is a lot of interaction between districts and schools, and it does help in terms of brushing us up in areas that we can improve."*

From the participants' responses, it is evident that districts subscribe to policy and bureaucratic approaches to leadership. Participants also referred to how they were expected to follow policy and comply with expectations and timelines as articulated by the district, suggesting adherence to top-down directives. These approaches make SMTs accountable for what occurs within their schools, while maintaining organisation and discipline within the schools. According to the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), district officials are mandated to "hold principals accountable for their schools." While this may be the case, participants shared that interference and a lack of planning from the district, has a negative impact on ensuring a smooth operation of the school. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) and Pont (2020) note that conforming to strict accountability measures reduces flexibility while promoting "uniformity". However, some participants noted there were positive effects on school management which included improvement of SMT knowledge, skills, and

overall growth. When district officials adopt the policy driven approach to leadership, schools sometimes exhibit improved performance and an organised schooling environment. However, conforming to the policy and expectations of district officials minimises the control that SMTs have over their schools. The participants' responses also suggest that district officials themselves are subjected to compliance, accountability and monitoring since they are middle-level managers and to ensure that schools under their care achieve envisaged expectations, they also adopt a similar approach to their superiors.

4.4.2 Curriculum and Instructional Management

From the interviews, the participants shared that the district placed a strong emphasis on advancing and making improvements to educational and methodological practices. It was indicated that district officials were practical and committed to assisting SMTs to strengthen their instructional duties. This included better planning and assessment and improved accountability. Mr Khumalo, a DH, shared, *"Yesterday they (the district officials) called different subject teachers because they wanted to focus on subjects that are not doing well. We told them our observations and proposed solutions on how they could assist us."* Adding to this, Mr Maharaj, a DH explained, *"Our subject advisor manages all the teachers (for the subject) in the district...they coordinate moderations, provide marksheets and lesson plan templates...everything you need in a classroom."*

Sharing another perspective, participants indicated that there is pressure for subjects to do well, and this encourages DHs to do better in their subjects, Mr Khumalo, a DH and Mr Mkhize, principal of School C respectively said:

At meetings, the district will stress that certain subjects are getting certain percentages. This adds pressure on teachers...strategies are shared and then improvement can be seen. **(Mr Khumalo)**

When you deal with district officials, you get people who worked as principals and have graduated to specialise...this empowers me because I get deeper insight and know exactly what to do. **(Mr Mkhize)**

The findings herein are supported by instructional leadership literature framed by Hallinger (2011) which emphasises the leader's duty, in this case, district officials as subject advisors in ensuring that curriculum is disseminated effectively in schools and that teachers are supported in administering the curriculum. Moreover, frequent and sustained monitoring of instruction and the curriculum contributes to the achievement of teaching and learning outcomes (Bush & Glover, 2014; Mestry, 2017). According to the participants, district officials ensured instructional uniformity across the district by checking and moderation learners' work,

engaging in meetings and discussions with PLCs to strategise, share ideas and resources. Additionally, the concern emerges when district officials use pressure and stress on SMTs and teachers to drive improvements in teaching and learning. In keeping with the transformational leadership theory, the findings in this section align to the dimensions of “individual consideration” and “intellectual stimulation.” “Individual consideration” is evidenced by the district leaders showing a concern with what goes on in schools, subsequently channelling resources, and expertise to mitigate such challenges. As previously mentioned in section 2.9.1.4 of Chapter 2, district officials build relationships with SMTs, listen to their unique challenges, and provide skills that help them achieve more, acting as coaches or mentors (Ariokiasamy et al., 2016, Greiman et al., 2007) and promoting two-way communication between schools and the district (Bass & Reggio, 2006). Furthermore, as part of the transformational leadership theory, district officials also demonstrate “intellectual stimulation” of SMTs where district officials encourage SMTs to adapt to the changing landscape to allow their schools to thrive (Irianti et al., 2024). As advances in the curriculum and instruction come to the fore, districts encourage SMTs to adopt new skills and change their methodological and pedagogical approaches (Cibane, 2020), contributing to professional development. However, the transformational leadership theory falls short in supporting this theme where it overlooks the complexities of the curriculum and instructional disseminations as the theory is predominantly concerned with the motivational and visionary aspects of leadership.

4.4.3 Building SMT Capacity

From the interviews, it became clear that district officials play an active role in supporting SMTs by developing them in their roles as school managers and DHs. To reinforce SMT roles as managers, participants shared that district officials build capacity in others, which is done through workshops, training, and mentoring sessions. From the participants’ responses, district officials are readily available to train and assist SMTs to develop their skills. The participants shared, *“They provide orientation workshops where they provide everything that we need in the classroom. I benefitted a lot from the professional development which led me to become a provincial moderator and examiner” (Mr Maharaj)*. *“When you make contact with them if you need something, they will assist” (Mr Khumalo)*. *“My subject advisor is always there whenever we need help, it’s less stressful because we have someone we can approach and that allows me to grow, he has given me many opportunities to grow” (Ms Dass)*. *“The district organised workshops about managing schools and that helped us to change things in our school. Now we have our own discipline policy and code of conduct” (Mr Dlamini)*. Mr Mthembu, a DH added,

The district held workshops for newly appointed SMT members. It was very helpful in terms of running the school. We were workshopped on school finances, health, LTSM and school functionality. **(Mr Mthembu)**

However, while some participants shared that workshops and meetings are provided by the district when schools make the request, other participants stated that the workshops and meetings held by district officials to build capacity in SMTs are sometimes inadequate to cater for developmental needs. Mr Mthembu, a DH shared, *“They provide professional development on request.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH said, *“When we need staff development, we approach the district, and they send someone.”* Mr Singh, principal of School B, shared a contrasting view, he said, *“The district is only partially fulfilling the requirement of building capacity in personnel. When capacity is not built, many (teachers and SMT) are really challenged.”*

From the participants’ responses, it is evident that districts play a role in capacitating and equipping SMTs in their managerial roles. However, its effectiveness and frequency are not consistent and can sometimes be seen as reactive. Some participants indicated the developmental workshops provided by the district aided them in becoming knowledgeable and competent professionals. According to Shava et al. (2021) professional development provided by the district instils confidence in teachers and SMTs to deliver the curriculum effectively. The *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012), mandates district officials to “provide targeted support to schools.” However, the concern about the current packaging of professional development opportunities are insufficient to equip SMTs and teachers in the school environment. Mestry (2017) and Naicker (2014) emphasise that consistent professional development enhances teachers and SMTs leadership and instructional work. Shava et al. (2021) add that SMT and teacher morale increased when the district makes provision for their development through active support and opportunities. Additionally, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) explain the reasons for inconsistent application of professional developing citing resource limitations and increased administration as contributors. The transformational leadership theory is supported by the participants’ responses to some extent. “Individualised consideration” is applied when the district responds to the needs of SMTs and teachers by providing workshops that they require to minimise gaps in their knowledge and skills. Moreover, “intellectual stimulation” is demonstrated when professional development activities and meetings encourage the participants to reflect on their own practices and then apply subsequent modifications. The shortfall in this theory arises when professional development is not consistently provided, affecting the development of teachers and SMTs.

4.4.4 Communication for School Management

From the interviews, the participants of this study revealed that district officials make efforts to communicate with schools and be updated about what goes on in schools which is predominantly done through established collaborative networks with SMTs. Communication usually occurs on instant messaging platforms or in-person meetings. District officials utilise their collaborative ties to relay information from the district to schools and allow SMTs to share ideas on matters of concern, giving SMTs a voice in matters that affect their schools. According to the participants, districts do not always force SMTs to abide by certain decisions, rather they give SMTs the freedom to choose the best solutions for their schools. Mr Maharaj, a DH said, *“They (the district officials) have group chats with DHs and teachers to cascade information. Information flows from the district to us quickly.”* Mr Khumalo, a DH shared, *“Those (WhatsApp) groups are very active. There will be something sent there daily.”* Mr Khumalo, a DH stated, *“They (the district officials) first ask us what we need to be assisted with. They don’t impose things; they check with us first.”* Ms Nkosi, a DH, shared, *“District officials communicate with us on WhatsApp, we are always informed if there is anything new, the subject advisor gives us information and guides us.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH said, *“I feel privileged working with my subject advisor because she shares information with me easily. She is always a phone call away and the timeous communication from the district allows me to prepare for district visits.”*

In contrast to the above-mentioned, a participant indicated that collaboration between SMTs and districts is not always consistent and sustained, if favourable conditions are present, district will create opportunities for collaboration and sharing of ideas. Mr Mkhize, principal of School C stated, *“They have more insights and other strategies, they will present it to us and say try this...”* Mr Dlamini, principal of School A stated, *“When we have problems in our schools, they (the district officials) share their views on the matter, and we decide whether to consider their views or not. They also accept our views whenever we discuss things with them. In rare cases, we are called to meetings to brainstorm on certain matters.* Adding to this, Mr Mkhize, principal of School C shared, *“Because they (the district officials) work with many schools and already have solutions to problems, it affects me positively because I do not get stuck with problems which allows me to run the school efficiently.”* However, Ms Nkosi, a DH shared,

Lack of proper and timeous communication causes disruption in our school. Last year, the principals were attending an accountability session at the district then suddenly all SMT members were called, we had to leave everything then we heard that learners were fighting, and some teachers cannot be left unattended. **(Ms Nkosi)**

From the interviews, it is evident that networks are formed by building relationships between

districts and schools (Spillane, 2005). From the participants' responses, both DHs and principals shared that communication between districts and SMTs occurs via one-on-one meetings, phone calls and WhatsApp groups. According to the *Policy on the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts* (RSA, 2012) district officials "serve as an information node for schools on matters of law, policy and administration." Additionally, when SMTs and districts communicate, it ensures that SMT work is aligned to envisaged expectations resulting in uniformity across the district. Naicker (2014) informs that collaboration and communication improves accountability and morale. This is done by emphasising collective responsibility and building trust amongst the stakeholders. Mestry (2017) maintains that forming relationships between districts and schools reinforces the management work of SMTs. However, Bantwini and Moorosi's (2018) work reveals that in some districts, communication is not constant and is sometimes unilateral. The findings align with the transformational leadership theory, particularly relating to "individual consideration" where districts collaborate with schools and acquaint themselves with the challenges that schools face and thereby address some of these challenges. "Inspirational motivation" is also applied where a culture of trust, communication and transparency is emphasised. These are traits which also form the basis of distributed leadership.

4.5 Strategies to Improve District Leadership

This section responds to the third research question. The intention is to highlight some of the leadership strategies that district officials are utilising that are an enabling influence on schools and also share leadership improvement strategies, as suggested by SMTs. The ideas shared herein comprises of a practical component that may strengthen district leadership. The strategies for improvement are discussed under the following themes: establishment of effective support systems, development of human relation skills and consideration of contexts.

4.5.4 Establish Effective Support Systems

From the interviews, the participants shared that there was a need to improve support systems within the district to drive the district's vision and mission. Participants shared that frequent meetings should be held between districts and SMTs that span across the year to ensure that schools are aligned with the district and that they are supported. Additionally, their commitment to support schools should be proactive. The support provided by the district should train SMTs to perform their duties adequately. Mr Khumalo, a DH and Mr Singh, principal of School B, said respectively:

Sometimes they (the district officials) brief us on what we should do but those meetings

only happen once a year. During the year we don't know what is happening, but we are expected to perform. We are the ones who must make contact with them (the district) if we need something, but they hardly come. **(Mr Khumalo)**

At any level, there must be some capacitation for the individual to do his job properly to know what the boundaries of his job is. Everybody needs some kind of training. **(Mr Singh)**

Some participants shared the benefits of engaging in workshops that support schools which enables SMTs to lead management or instructional improvements in their schools. Mr Maharaj said, *"They have structured meetings or workshops where they train and workshop us."* Mr Dlamini, principal of School A said, *"The district organised workshops about managing schools and that helped us change things in our school."* Ms Dass, a DH shared, *"We meet with the subject advisor four to five times a year at district, cluster or orientation meetings, they guide us to make sure we are up to date with our work in keeping up with the ATP."* Ms Nkosi, a DH, said,

When we introduced a new subject, the subject advisor made sure that we had everything we needed to achieve. She always phoned me or was here, she sent lead teachers to help and guide the teacher and she made sure that as DH, I knew exactly what to look for when moderating papers. Her support really helped us do well. **(Ms Nkosi)**

It also emerged that districts should show their support to SMTs by meeting the needs of the schools. Mr Mthembu, a DH said, *"Whenever you need them, they should try to meet your needs. We have a shortage of teachers and we made requests, but it has become a crisis because there is instability and chaos in the school".* Ms Nkosi shared, *"District support is not 100% but they are trying their best because we still need teachers and resources. They should also employ more subject advisors to support schools."* Ms Ndlovu, a DH added, *"Sometimes the districts do support us in terms of empowerment but when it comes to providing funding and resources they are failing."*

From the participants' responses, it was revealed that district officials commit to supporting schools through workshops and meetings. However, this support, feedback and monitoring is irregular. Participants noted that when support was given, it had an impact on the work they did. According to Hallinger (2011) support must be sustained over time to reap benefits from it and this support must be complemented by monitoring and feedback. Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) found that inconsistent support from the district negatively affects the morale of SMTs. According to the transformational leadership theory, "individual consideration" can be applied when districts recognise that schools have varying needs and require specific means of support to equip them to execute their work. Additionally, "intellectual stimulation" is practiced when the

support provided by district, allows SMTs to engage in a reflexive process and make the necessary improvements to their leadership and management duties. However, it is noted that support, feedback, and monitoring mechanisms must be in place and done consistently to allow the district to realise its goals. Additionally, some support required from district officials may extend beyond the scope and abilities of district officials as they are also subjected to similar constraints that schools experience.

4.5.5 Development of Human Relation Skills

From the interviews, participants shared characteristics displayed by district officials which encouraged and motivated SMTs in their work. The participants shared some essential characteristics and skills that district officials should exhibit, which includes empathy and understanding; approachability; supportive attitude; communication skills; trustworthiness and transparency.

Mr Singh, principal of School B shared, *“My acting circuit manager is able to sit and listen. As a principal himself, he has a clear picture of some of the difficulties we face, and he listens with a careful sympathetic ear. His attitude in approaching us as schools is polite and supportive.”*

Mr Dlamini, principal of School A said, *“I don’t feel belittled when engaging with them. They allow me to be open and I can share critical information with them. They are also open and ready to help me.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH stated, *“They don’t come to criticise. They say, ‘let’s see how we can fix this.’ We can even phone or send them a message if we need help and they respond.”* Ms Nkosi, a DH further added, *“When you are new, they don’t leave you. The subject advisor pairs you with another DH. They keep checking if you are coping.”* Ms Dass, a DH said, *“They are approachable, understanding, sociable and someone we can turn to when we have issues.”* Ms Nkosi shared, *“District officials should have good communication skills, have open door policies, be honest, transparent and be people we can trust.”* Mr Mthembu, a DH, said, *“They must be down to earth and willing to assist. They must also maintain a smooth relationship with the principal to make the school functional.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH stated, *“District officials must have communication, leadership, problem solving skills and empathy.”*

From the participants’ responses, district possession of positive human relation skills is critical as part of their leadership. SMTs feel supported when there is trust, empathy and communication between them and the district. However, these qualities are unevenly spread amongst district officials. The participants’ responses are supported in Section 2.7.2 of Chapter 2, which stress that interpersonal skills promote collaboration between district officials and SMTs, which improves SMT motivation to manage and lead their schools (Grissom & Condon,

2021a). King and Holland (2025) add that when district officials harness human relation skills, SMTs feel supported in the work. The findings from the interviews align with the transformational leadership theory, particularly related to the “idealised influence” dimension where district officials display specific human relation skills, which affect how SMTs conduct their work. The findings also indicated “inspirational influence” where the human relation skills that districts possess creates an enabling SMT, which motivates them to conduct their work.

4.5.6 Consideration of Contexts

From the interviews, participants shared that district officials should be cognisant of the individual contexts in which their schools operate. In this theme, participants shared their views of how districts can support their schools better by taking into consideration their contexts. From the participants, it emerged that districts should first ask schools what they need. Based on this, the various sub-directorates of the district should maintain some visibility in schools, and this will empower SMTs and teachers. Furthermore, participants shared that they require workshops and meetings that target specific aspects of their management and instructional work. They suggested that districts should employ more subject advisors, place more teachers in schools to mitigate shortages and equitably allocate funds to schools to ensure that schools are functioning well. Participants further added that districts support SMTs when they (SMTs) make decisions for their schools. Mr Khumalo, a DH stated, *“They must first ask us what we need to be assisted with.”* Ms Dass added, *“Some SMT and teachers supposed to meet the circuit manager at an accountability meeting but there was something going on in the school. The circuit manager understood that not all teachers could attend, he helped us in that way.”*

Mr Dlamini, principal of School A, Mr Khumalo, and Ms Nkosi, who are both DHs suggested,

We do get support from the circuit manager, but the circuit manager cannot be good in all sections. When we deal with the circuit manager, he oversees a lot of things, and he is not well versed in certain sections. All sections in the district can have a programme to visit each school once a year. The direct support from the different sections would help a lot. **(Mr Dlamini)**

Their workshops take the whole day. They should have specific workshops for curriculum, management, administration and so forth, that will equip us easily and quickly. If they combine all those aspects in one day, it becomes a problem. **(Mr Khumalo)**

Something they can do better is employ more subject advisors according to circuits because iLembe district is very big. Sometimes when we want to consult with subject advisors, we can’t get them because they are stressed with other work, working long hours and weekends. **(Ms Nkosi)**

Mr Mthembu, a DH, elaborated, *“They (the district) must work with and maintain a smooth relationship with the principal so that the principal can make the school functional because they will know what the school needs.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH, said, *“District must support the decision that SMTs make for the school, they must not go against it. They must put themselves in the teacher’s shoes, so they get experience of how difficult it is to deal with today’s generation.”* Mr Mkhize, principal of School C, Ms Nkosi and Ms Dass, who are both DHs respectively shared,

The department should consider the school’s needs. Although we are a technical school, we receive the same allocation of funds so we cannot perform well. I would say to the department, ‘Do not tell me to get 100% when you are failing to provide financial support so don’t call us to meetings and tell us to account for results because we are not the ones at fault. **(Mr Mkhize)**

Sometimes the district plays hide and seek with us. When we inform them that we need more teachers, they don’t get back to us. Learners are left unattended, or we try to push the work to another teacher causing the teacher to become overburdened and stressed. District needs to help with these situations. **(Ms Nkosi)**

They should review the load of DHs and give DHs more time to interact with the CM. That might help because they would know of issues being faced by teachers and SMT. In my department, I am overseeing four subjects from grade 8 to 12. It’s a lot to ask from the DH in terms of running the department, we are over-saddled with work and not giving off our best. **(Ms Dass)**

Mr Mthembu, a DH added, *“Each school has their own requirements to ensure the school functions well. In my school, we are short on teachers and when we call them to get feedback, they become quiet.”* Ms Ndlovu, a DH shared, *“The continuous meetings held by the district are not always helpful. These meetings take us out of school, and we get left behind with our work.”*

From the interviews, the participants shared their accounts of how district officials currently approach them as SMTs and how their approach is not always adequate in aiding their work in schools. They emphasised that district officials must adapt to various schools and respond to the needs of their individual schools. If individual contexts are not recognised, it may cause disruption in schools and low morale in SMTs and teachers. These findings align to Section 2.7.4 of Chapter 2 which indicate that consideration of individual schools’ contexts allow districts to support schools better which ensures their alignment to the district’s vision and mission (Anderson & Rincón-Gallardo, 2021; Dhanpat & Naicker, 2024; Lee et al., 2012). The findings from the interviews align with the transformational leadership theory, particularly related to the “individual consideration” dimension where district officials become aware of the contexts that each school finds themselves in and provide subsequent assistance to respond

to the needs of the school.

4.6 Chapter Summary

In this chapter, the findings from the interviews and subsequent discussions were presented in relation to the research questions that guided this study. This was further combined with the literature that was reviewed and the Transformational Leadership Theory which grounded this study. The findings showed that district officials adopt various leadership approaches inclusive of policy-driven, instructional, supportive, and collaborative leadership approaches, which affects the work of school management. The findings further revealed that the leadership approaches utilised by district officials enhance accountability, discipline, instruction, capacity building and communication in schools. To strengthen district leadership, it was revealed that districts need to establish better support systems, develop and enhance human relation skills and respond to specific school contexts. The next chapter presents the summary, conclusion and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER 5: SUMMARY, CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

5.1 Introduction

The preceding chapter comprised of the responses shared by the participants during the data generation stage to answer the research questions. Subsequently analysis and discussion of these responses followed. This chapter presents the summary of this study, which underscores fundamental ideas from the preceding chapters, re-examining the research questions in accordance with the context. Following this, the main findings of this study are summarised. Then I present the conclusion and lastly, the recommendations for practice and further research.

5.2 Summary of the Study

On completion of the data generation stage, I gained a valuable understanding of the topic I have been researching. In this section, the research questions are articulated and are followed by a summary of the preceding chapters of this study, which are aligned to the findings. As a reminder, this study comprised of the following research questions:

- a) What approaches do district officials adopt when working with schools?
- b) How do district officials' leadership approaches affect how schools are managed?
- c) How can district officials' leadership approaches be improved to positively affect how schools are managed?

Chapter one articulated the introduction, background, rationale for the study and the problem statement. I found that effective leadership is said to contribute to the direction of education in the country. Leadership is then required for schools to be effective. Furthermore, the leadership approaches adopted by district officials can determine the extent to which schools succeed. Districts are viewed as intermediaries between the national and provincial department of education and schools. They therefore have a centralised role necessitating the need for districts and schools to work in harmony. Districts are tasked with adequately preparing SMT members to execute their functions to ensure that their schools operate smoothly, and providing appropriate resources to ultimately ensure that the goals of their schools are realised. Districts are tasked to then bring transformation and enable learners to perform optimally in conducive environments. This chapter then consisted of the aim of the study, the research questions, and a discussion on the vital concepts, which includes district office, district officials, school leadership, school management and leadership approaches.

Chapter two begins by presenting an overview of education districts in South Africa and then outlining the functions of district officials from the perspective of policy. Current leadership approaches of district officials were investigated, which comprises of bureaucratic, instructional, and distributed leadership. Under each leadership approach, crucial characteristics and the effect of each approach was discussed. It was found that district officials are viewed as intermediaries who ensure that policies are implemented at school level. Their roles also consist of offering support to SMTs and teachers through streamlining and assisting SMTs with management and curriculum related matters. To effectively support schools, district officials adopt various leadership approaches. The leadership approach they adopt depends on the objective they need to meet. At the core of their roles and responsibilities they are instructional leaders who ensure that quality teaching and learning is taking place in schools. These leadership approaches are perceived differently by different SMT members and therefore have varying impacts on how SMTs approach their work. Towards the latter part of the chapter, a discussion on strategies that district officials can adopt to improve school management was presented. This section recognised the need for all schools in a district to have a shared mission and vision, district officials as leaders should possess some fundamental leadership characteristics that form the basis of their work, providing SMTs with professional development opportunities and tailoring support, depending on the situations that SMTs find themselves in. This was followed by the gaps that were exposed from the literature consulted and lastly, the theoretical framework, embedded in transformational leadership, was articulated.

Chapter three provided details on the research design and methodology. This study was framed within the interpretivist paradigm, with a focus on the qualitative research approach. The case study research design was adopted, which allowed me to explore the phenomenon in the participants natural settings, which were their schools. These were suitable selections as this study recognises that human interactions are unique and therefore people respond to situations differently. Furthermore, it attempts to provide an in-depth understanding of leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how this affected school management. Purposive and convenience sampling was used to select nine (9) participants who comprised of principals and DHs. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were used to generate data. Lastly, the chapter dealt with trustworthiness and ethical considerations.

Chapter four first provides a background of the participants who were involved in the study. This was followed by their responses, which were then analysed and discussed. The findings from this chapter were separated into themes to respond to the research questions. The participants responses gave an insight into the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how this affected school management with a focus on the KwaZulu-Natal province of South Africa. Based on the leadership approaches adopted by district officials, the following themes emerged: policy-driven approach; instruction-focused approach; supportive leadership; collaborative leadership. Expanding on how district officials' leadership approaches affect school management, the following themes arose: accountability and organisational discipline; curriculum and instructional management; building SMT capacity and communication for school management. Lastly, participants shared how district officials can improve their leadership. The strategies they shared comprised of district officials establishing support systems; developing human relation skills; and responding to specific contexts. The responses of the participants are included to give voice to them, thereby adding to the richness of their responses.

5.3 Summarising the Findings

This section comprises of the findings derived from this study. This section is sub-divided to respond to the research question and the findings are summarised accordingly.

5.3.1 What Approaches Do District Officials Adopt When Working with Schools?

This sub-section is divided into predominant leadership approaches that district officials adopt, which is followed by a discussion on the findings.

5.3.1.1 Policy-Driven and Bureaucratic Leadership

A policy-driven approach was a vital leadership approach that was adopted by district officials. The focus on policy as a determining factor in governing district officials' work entailed that they themselves complied with policies set out by the Department of Basic Education. District officials then used these policies to influence and guide their work with SMTs. Adhering to policies that are enforced by district officials ensure that SMTs are kept abreast and that there is standardisation of work across schools in the district. In many instances, SMTs are confronted with unique challenges that affect their schools and schools are advised by districts to comply with processes and procedures set out in policy, even though policy may be inadequate in addressing unique challenges.

5.3.1.2 Instructional Leadership

The district's focus on improving teaching and learning is a core duty that they are mandated to perform. District officials provide SMTs with support when they traverse through curriculum and instructional matters. District officials, particularly subject advisors who work closely with DHs ensure that DHs and teachers are familiar with nuances in the curriculum and lend subsequent support to ensure that the curriculum is effectively disseminated at school-level. District officials support the teaching-learning process and develop DHs and teachers in this regard as they are seen as specialists in their respective subjects. They were found to be active propellants in their instructional leadership roles.

5.3.1.3 Supportive and Collaborative Leadership

Districts committed to supporting SMTs when they learned about the challenges that confronted SMTs. District officials offered support on management and instructional related matters. As part of their roles to support, they developed and empowered SMTs. SMTs relied on district officials to capacitate and empower them to drive their schools towards improvement. Additionally, district officials engaged and collaborated with SMTs to find out what support was needed in their respective schools and what the developmental needs of the SMT were. Collaboration and engagement between district officials and SMTs are not a common practice, but it is a platform that is utilised when there are opportunities for it. When district officials collaborate with schools, they feel included and part of a team. Furthermore, district officials have first-hand knowledge and an arsenal of solutions to share with SMTs, reducing the time SMTs spend on addressing challenging matters – this can happen when support and collaboration is sustained.

5.3.2 How do District Officials' Leadership Approaches Affect How Schools Are Managed?

This sub-section is divided into main areas of school management which are affected by district leadership. This is followed by a discussion on the findings.

5.3.2.1 Accountability and School Discipline

When policy-driven and bureaucratic leadership was adopted by district officials, SMTs were found to be more accountable, and schools were more disciplined. Districts themselves are accountable to higher structures. District officials allow SMTs some flexibility in how they manage their schools even when they drive SMTs to adhere to policies. When districts adopted

the policy-driven or bureaucratic leadership approaches when working with SMTs, schools were found to be more orderly and there was standardisation across different schools, resulting in school improvements. When district officials enforced policies on SMTs, SMTs produced sub-standard work which did not always benefit the school. Additionally, to ensure that policies were adhered to, sometimes districts were found to be disorganised resulting in non-integration of school and district plans. This added pressure on SMTs and sometimes disrupted the school's operations.

5.3.2.2 Curriculum and Instructional Management

District officials showed support to SMTs by engaging with them and providing targeted support to DHs and teachers. District officials also provide adequate resources and materials to ensure that the curriculum is disseminated effectively. Moreover, since district officials are seen as specialists in their subjects, the support and pressure from district officials encourages DHs and teachers to improve their performance in subjects.

5.3.2.3 Building SMT Capacity

District officials play an active role in developing and empowering SMTs, especially in their management duties. When district officials build capacity in SMTs, it results in the professional growth of SMTs, improvements in the school environment, more confidence in SMT abilities and a higher morale. However, district officials were not always proactive in providing training and development for SMTs, but they did respond to SMTs' requests when training was needed. Additionally, not all training and empowerment initiatives adequately instilled the necessary skills and competencies in SMTs.

5.3.2.4 Communication for School Management

Communication occurs between schools and districts to ensure that information is relayed from the district to schools. When SMTs are given the platform to collaborate with district officials, they can share critical matters which affect their school. Communication between district officials and SMTs usually take place on instant messaging platforms, which were found to be active with information being shared there daily. Districts are a node of information for schools and when district officials communicate with SMTs, SMTs are kept abreast with developments they need to be cognisant of. Furthermore, two-way communication between district officials and SMTs allow for the sharing of ideas to solve problems in schools, this enables SMTs to focus on other aspects of the school environment that requires their attention. It was found that

districts and SMTs communicate when there are opportunities to do so and therefore reap the benefits of communication, SMTs indicated that districts must communicate timeously with them. When communication occurs between district officials and SMTs and is done consistently, collective responsibility and trust is promoted.

5.3.3 How Can District Officials' Leadership Approaches Be Improved to Positively Affect How Schools Are Managed?

This sub-section is divided into strategies that district officials can adopt to improve their leadership role positively affecting school management. This is followed by a discussion on the findings.

5.3.3.1 Improving Support Systems

Districts should lend support to SMTs consistently over the course of the year. District officials should have initial and follow-up support sessions with SMTs to ensure SMTs are aligned with the goals of the district. Furthermore, support from district officials should be proactive and should target specific areas of concern that are identified by the SMT. District officials should also focus on enhancing SMT management skills and competencies. Districts fall short on providing adequate support to SMTs because they have limited personnel to lead support initiatives and are limited in terms of directing financial and material resources to schools.

5.3.3.2 Human Relation Skills

Inculcating and enhancing some human relation skills are a crucial factor that demonstrates district officials' leadership. SMTs responded positively to district officials when district officials displayed understanding and showed empathy to the challenges that confronted SMTs. Moreover, district officials who are approachable and open were found to be more supportive of SMTs. A significant proportion of district officials' work is based on them communicating and interacting with SMTs, therefore effective communication skills are necessary.

5.3.3.3 Response to Contexts

Districts should be considerate of the contexts that schools find themselves in and then lend appropriate support. They should be proactive in determining what SMTs require to ensure that appropriate support is directed to them which can result in a well-functioning school. Additionally, the sub-directorates of the district should maintain visibility in schools to ensure that SMTs are provided with targeted support. Furthermore, district officials should support

the decisions made by SMTs as SMTs know their school's best and this also shows that the school and district acts as a cohesive unit. Therefore, district officials and SMTs should engage more to allow districts to be informed of what is taking place in schools.

5.4 Conclusions: Learning from the Findings

In response to the first research question, the study found that district officials do not rely on a single approach that underpins their work. However, they adopt various leadership approaches that are dependent on the context and purpose of their work. Firstly, policy-driven, and bureaucratic leadership is primarily adopted by district officials to ensure that policies are implemented across schools in the district. While this approach ensures uniformity, it is inflexible and restrictive. Secondly, district officials adopt instructional leadership to ensure that the curriculum is disseminated in schools as it has been envisaged, setting in motion improvements in teaching and learning and supporting SMTs and teachers. Supportive and collaborative leadership which is adopted by district officials encourages SMTs to play an active role in decision-making processes, which boosts SMT morale. However, this approach is not always practiced.

In response to the second research question, it was found that bureaucracy and policy-driven leadership creates order and discipline in schools, promoting accountability. Sometimes when the bureaucratic and policy-driven leadership is adopted, district officials can disrupt schools and can limit SMTs from deriving solutions to their unique challenges. Secondly, when subject advisors used instructional leadership, it was found to play an active role in supporting DHs and teachers in terms of teaching and learning, which had a positive effect on learner performance. Additionally, when district officials supported and empowered SMTs and teachers through professional development opportunities and capacity building, SMTs were more competent and confident in their leadership and management roles. However, developmental opportunities are not always available nor are they provided sustainably. Moreover, there is two-way communication between SMTs and the district, which ensures collective responsibility and district-school goal alignment. However, communication between the two stakeholders is not always consistent.

In response to the final research question, it was found that schools can be improved when there is individualised, and consistent support given to SMTs by district officials. Follow-up meetings need to be in place and more district officials and resources should be made available

to capitalise on the benefits of support. Secondly, positive relationships are built when district officials are approachable, are able to empathise and properly communicate with SMTs. These characteristics emphasise transparency and trust between schools and the district. Lastly, district officials should allow SMTs to devise solutions to their specific contextual challenges, as all school operate within specific situations.

To summarise, this study has various implications for district leadership practice. Firstly, autocratic and bureaucratic leadership approaches should not be the predominant approach which district officials adopt. Secondly, instructional leadership is still relevant and practical for district officials and SMTs to improve schools. Next, leadership that encourages positive relationships between district officials and SMTs and response to context-specific needs are now being emphasised, especially where leaders are approachable, communicates and is empathetic. This highlights the need for leadership to extend beyond policy and compliance and build capacity to promote school improvements. These findings suggests that leadership is fluid and that it is constantly changing and transforming and in many cases, leadership may use a combination of bureaucratic, instructional, distributed or servant leadership approaches, which has differing effects on school management. Additionally, this study contributes to the broader body of literature by exploring the experiences of district leadership, as shared by SMTs. This study also how SMTs respond to district leadership when districts approach leadership in various ways.

5.5 Recommendations

This section presents the recommendations of this study. The recommendations are presented in two parts: firstly, recommendations for practice and secondly, recommendations for future research.

5.5.1 Recommendations for Practice

Following the presentation of the findings and conclusions, the following recommendations are made:

- Sustained use of instructional leadership.

Subject advisors and district officials should provide curriculum support to SMTs and teachers during the year. The support should be in the form follow-up meetings, guidance and professional development on curriculum and management related matters.

- Improve the relational leadership skills.
Leadership should improve the way they communicate and strengthen their approachability, empathy and professional skills when interacting with SMTs. These skills are necessary in developing trust and building collaborative networks with SMTs to make a positive impact on schools.
- Awareness of contextual factors.
District leaders should be aware of contextual factors that affect schools and provide targeted and continued support to schools. This can be achieved when district officials maintain visibility in schools and allowing SMTs some level of autonomy.

5.5.2. Recommendations for Future Research

The sample size of this study comprised of a few participants, making the findings difficult to generalise. Additionally, the study focused on one district in the KwaZulu-Natal province. As stated in the previous chapters, district leadership is performed differently in the various South African provinces. Consequently, there is a need to explore this phenomenon in other provinces. This study highlighted the perspectives of SMT members. Future research could share the perspectives of teachers and district officials themselves, to provide a more holistic view of the phenomenon. Additionally, future research could examine contemporary leadership approaches that can be adopted in various contexts.

5.5 A Final Word

This study was an exploratory journey to determine the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and their effect on the management of schools, with a focus on secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal. The study highlighted some core leadership approaches that district officials adopted and the effects of these leadership approaches on school management. DHs and principals, as part of SMTs were interviewed and gave valuable insights on the leadership of district officials. I found that the leadership of district officials play an important role when they work with SMTs. District officials' leadership has a ripple effect on schools' operations. The study also shares some crucial strategies for district officials to enhance their leadership approaches. A key takeaway from this study is that district leadership is not about choosing a single leadership approach, but about balancing technical competence, relationships and contextual responsiveness to support school management meaningfully.

This chapter outlines the summary of the findings that arose from the study. This was followed by the conclusions. Finally, this research provided recommendations for practice, an important stepping stone towards informing the leadership approaches that district officials adopt, which ultimately benefits school management. The recommendations also steer the direction for future research.

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APPENDIX A: KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Permission Letter



KWAZULU-NATAL PROVINCE

EDUCATION
REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

OFFICE OF THE HEAD OF DEPARTMENT

Private Bag X9137, PIETERMARITZBURG, 3200
Anton Lembede Building, 247 Burger Street, Pietermaritzburg, 3201
Email: Phindile.duma@kzndoe.gov.za
Tel: 033 392 1063

Enquiries: Phindile Duma

Ref.:2/4/8/230

Ms T Birbal



Dear Ms Birbal

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH IN THE KZN DoE INSTITUTIONS

Your application to conduct research entitled: **"LEADERSHIP APPROACHES ADOPTED BY DISTRICT OFFICIALS AND THEIR EFFECT ON THE MANAGEMENT OF SCHOOLS – A CASE STUDY OF SECONDARY SCHOOLS IN KWAZULU-NATAL"**, in the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education Institutions has been approved. The conditions of the approval are as follows:

1. The researcher will make all the arrangements concerning the research and interviews.
2. The researcher must ensure that Educator and learning programmes are not interrupted.
3. Interviews are not conducted during the time of writing examinations in schools.
4. Learners, Educators, Schools and Institutions are not identifiable in any way from the results of the research.
5. A copy of this letter is submitted to District Managers, Principals and Heads of Institutions where the Intended research and interviews are to be conducted.
6. The period of investigation is limited to the period from 27 May 2024 to 31 March 2027.
7. Your research and interviews will be limited to the schools you have proposed and approved by the Head of Department. Please note that Principals, Educators, Departmental Officials and Learners are under no obligation to participate or assist you in your investigation.
8. Should you wish to extend the period of your survey at the school(s), please contact Miss Phindile Duma at the contact numbers above.
9. Upon completion of the research, a brief summary of the findings, recommendations or a full report/dissertation/thesis must be submitted to the research office of the Department. Please address it to The Office of the HOD, Private Bag X9137, Pietermaritzburg, 3200.
10. Please note that your research and interviews will be limited to schools and institutions in KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education.

ILEMBE DISTRICT



Mr GN Ngcobo
Head of Department: Education
Date: 03 June 2024

GROWING KWAZULU-NATAL TOGETHER

APPENDIX B: University of KwaZulu-Natal Ethical Clearance Approval



09 July 2024

Tarana Birbal (222124661)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear T Birbal,

Protocol reference number: HSSREC/00007137/2024

Project title: Leadership approaches adopted by district officials and their effect on the management of schools a case study of secondary schools in KwaZulu-Natal

Degree: Masters

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received on 07 June 2024 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**.

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number.

PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

Incidents of adverse events and serious adverse events (AEs and SAEs) should be reported in writing to HSSREC, the study sponsors, and any regulatory authority (where appropriate), within 7 working days of the occurrence for local sites and 14 days for all other South African sites.

This approval is valid until 09 July 2025.

To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

HSSREC is registered with the South African National Health Research Ethics Council (REC-040414-040).

Yours sincerely,

Professor Dipane Hlalele (Chair)
/dd

Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee

Postal Address: Private Bag X54001, Durban, 4000, South Africa

Telephone: +27 (0)31 260 8350/4557/3587 Email: hssrec@ukzn.ac.za Website: <http://research.ukzn.ac.za/Research-Ethics>

Founding Campuses:  Edgewood  Howard College  Medical School  Pietermaritzburg  Westville

INSPIRING GREATNESS

APPENDIX C: Invitation to Participate

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

For research with human participants

Information Sheet and Consent to Participate in Research

2 July 2024

Dear Principal/Deputy Principal/Departmental Head

My name is Tarana Birbal, a Master of Education student from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, School of Education, Edgewood Campus. Contact details: [REDACTED];
[REDACTED]

You are being invited to consider participating in a study that involves research that will investigate the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how these approaches impact the management of schools within South Africa. The purpose of this research is to examine the leadership styles and practices of district officials, the research aims to identify strategies that foster stronger relationships between districts and schools. The study is expected to enroll twelve participants in total. Participants will comprise of the Principal, Deputy Principal and two Departmental Heads from three schools within the iLembe District. The study will involve the use of unstructured one-on-one interviews, which will be audio-recorded. The duration of your participation if you choose to enroll and remain in the study is expected to be 30-45 minutes.

The study will provide no direct benefits to participants. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective district leadership models, leading to improved school management and enhanced student learning.

There is no potential risks associated with this study.

This study has been ethically reviewed and approved by the UKZN Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (approval number_____).

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or the supervisor Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details as follows:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557- Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Participation in this research is voluntary and participants may withdraw their participation at any time. In the event of refusal/withdrawal of participation the participants will not incur penalty or loss or other benefit to which they are normally entitled. There will be no consequences if a participant wishes to withdraw from the study. Should a participant wish to withdraw, kindly inform the researcher.

There are no costs that might be incurred as a result of participation in the study. Participants will not be remunerated for their participation in this study.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to any data collection. This will encompass a clear explanation of the study's purpose, data collection methods, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time. The study will not provide direct benefits to participants. There will be no alternative procedures that may serve as alternate option to the study participants.

Participant confidentiality will be ensured. All data will be anonymised, and pseudonyms will be used in reporting the findings. Audio recordings will be securely stored and destroyed after five years.

In your capacity as a School Management Team member, I hereby request your participation in this study. If my request is acceded, kindly complete the attached consent form.

APPENDIX D: Gatekeeper's Letter

UKZN HUMANITIES AND SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS COMMITTEE (HSSREC)

APPLICATION FOR ETHICS APPROVAL

Information Sheet and Consent for Your Participation in Research

Project title: **Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the Management of Schools – a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal**

Dear District Director

My name is **Tarana Birbal**, a Master of Education student from the University of Kwa-Zulu Natal, School of Education, Edgewood Campus.

South African schools face a continuous challenge of enhancing teaching and learning outcomes. While many initiatives focus on classroom practices, a crucial yet often overlooked area lies in the relationship between district officials and schools. A positive and collaborative synergy between these two entities is essential for successful school reform and overall educational improvement (Tingle et al., 2019). Research suggests that nurturing relationships between district officials and schools lead to better support for schools and, consequently, improved learner achievement (Bantwini 2018).

This study will investigate the leadership approaches adopted by district officials and how these approaches impact the management of schools within South Africa. By examining the leadership styles and practices of district officials, the research aims to identify strategies that foster stronger relationships between districts and schools. Ultimately, the study seeks to contribute to the development of more effective district leadership models, leading to improved school management and ultimately, enhanced student learning.

This study will employ a qualitative research approach to explore the leadership approaches of district officials and their impact on school management. Data will be collected through unstructured one-on-one interviews. Twelve participants from three schools within the ILembe District will be purposefully and conveniently selected, which will include members of the school management team (e.g., principal, deputy principal, departmental heads) who collaborate directly with district officials.

Informed consent will be obtained from all participants prior to any data collection. This will encompass a clear explanation of the study's purpose, data collection methods, potential risks and benefits, and participants' right to withdraw from the study at any time.

Participant confidentiality will be ensured. All data will be anonymised, and pseudonyms will be used in reporting the findings. Audio recordings will be securely stored and destroyed after a predetermined period.

In your capacity as the District Director, I hereby request permission to conduct research in the ILembe District, utilising the aforementioned personnel who will be participants in the study. I intend to interview participants and audio record responses. If approval is granted, kindly furnish me with an approval letter on an appropriate letterhead.

In the event of any problems or concerns/questions you may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or the supervisor Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED] or the UKZN Humanities & Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee, contact details below.

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus Govan
Mbeki Building
Private Bag X 54001
Durban
4000 KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609 Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Thank you for your time and consideration.

Ms Tarana Birbal

28 April 2024

APPENDIX E: Permission to Conduct Research in Schools

[REDACTED]
15 July 2024

Dear Tarana Birbal

RE: PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT [REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

I am writing to formally grant you permission to conduct research entitled **‘Leadership Approaches Adopted by District Officials and Their Effect on the Management of Schools – a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwa-Zulu Natal’** at [REDACTED] School. The research will involve interactions with staff, and audio recorders will be used. We understand that you will adhere to all ethical guidelines and regulations governing research involving human participants and will prioritise the safety and privacy of our staff.

As part of this study, individuals’ participation will be voluntary and at their own discretion. We also understand that the data collected will remain entirely confidential and may not be provided to anyone outside of the research team without permission from Glenhills Secondary School.

Furthermore, you will coordinate closely with our staff to ensure minimal disruption to the school's daily operations. We understand that we reserve the right to withdraw from the study at any time if our circumstances change.

Yours sincerely
[REDACTED]
[REDACTED]

School Stamp

APPENDIX F: Informed consent letters

Appendix F.1: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 1 (Pseudonym: Mr Dlamini)

CONSENT

I (Name)..... have been informed about the study, "Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on or Prof. Phumlani Myende on

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

Unstructured on-on-one interviews

Answering the interview questions

Audio-record my interviews

Signature of Participant

YES/NO

YES/NO

YES/NO

14/08/24.
Date

Appendix F.2: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 2 (Pseudonym: Mr Khumalo)

I (Name). [REDACTED]have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my
satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw
at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that
I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or
Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am
concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

Unstructured on-on-one interviews

Answering the interview questions

Audio-record my interviews

Signature of Participant

Signature of Witness

☒ YES ☐ NO

☒ YES ☐ NO

☒ YES ☐ NO

01/08/2024

Date

Date

Appendix F.3: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 3 (Pseudonym: Ms Ndlovu)

CONSENT

I (Name)..... have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my
satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw
at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that
I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on or
Prof. Phumlani Myende on

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am
concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

Unstructured on-on-one interviews

Answering the interview questions

Audio-record my interviews

.....

Signature of Participant

.....

Signature of Witness

(YES/NO

(YES/NO

(YES/NO

02/08/2024

Date

Date

Appendix F.4: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 4 (Pseudonym: Mr Mthembu)

CONSENT

I (Name) [REDACTED] have been informed about the study, "Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

Unstructured on-on-one interviews

YES/NO

Answering the interview questions

YES/NO

Audio-record my interviews

YES /NO

Signature of Participant

Signature of Witness

Date

17/09/2024.

Date

Appendix F.5: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 5 (Pseudonym: Ms Dass)

CONSENT

I (Name) [REDACTED] have been informed about the study, "Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

on-on-one interviews

YES/NO

Answering the interview questions

YES/NO

Audio record my interviews

YES /NO

Signature of Participant

Signature of Witness

21/08/2024

Date

21/08/2024

Date

Appendix F.6: Informed Consent letter: Participant 6 (Pseudonym: Mr Singh)

CONSENT

I (Name).....[REDACTED].....have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED]

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

on-on-one interviews

Answering the interview questions

Audio-record my interviews

Signature of Participant

Signature of Witness

✓ YES/NO

✓ YES/NO

✓ YES/NO

Date

Date

Appendix F.7: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 7 (Pseudonym: Ms Nkosi)

CONSENT

I (Name).....have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my
satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw
at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that
I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on or
Prof. Phumlani Myende on

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am
concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

on-on-one interviews

YES/NO

Answering the interview questions

YES/NO

Audio-record my interviews

YES /NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

Appendix F.8: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 8 (Pseudonym: Mr Mkhize)

CONSENT

I (Name)..... have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my
satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw
at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that
I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on or
Prof. Phumlani Myende on

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am
concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

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Research Office, Westville Campus

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Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ulcn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

on-on-one interviews

YES/NO

Answering the interview questions

YES/NO

Audio-record my interviews

YES /NO

Signature of Participant

Date

Signature of Witness

Date

Appendix F.9: Informed Consent Letter: Participant 9 (Pseudonym: Mr Maharaj)

CONSENT

I (Name)..... have been informed about the study,
"Leadership Approaches Adopted By District Officials and Their Effect on the
Management of Schools - a Case Study of Secondary Schools in Kwazulu-Natal" by
Tarana Birbal.

I understand the purpose and procedures of the study.

I have been allowed to ask questions about the study and have had answers to my satisfaction.

I declare that my participation in this study is entirely voluntary and that I may withdraw at any time without affecting any of the benefits that I am usually is entitled to.

I have been informed that there will be no remuneration for my participation in this study..

If I have any further questions/concerns or queries related to the study, I understand that I may contact the researcher, Tarana Birbal on [REDACTED] or Prof. Phumlani Myende on [REDACTED].

If I have any questions or concerns about my rights as a study participant, or if I am concerned about an aspect of the study or the researchers then I may contact:

HUMANITIES & SOCIAL SCIENCES RESEARCH ETHICS ADMINISTRATION

Research Office, Westville Campus

Govan Mbeki Building

Private Bag X 54001

Durban

4000

KwaZulu-Natal, SOUTH AFRICA

Tel: 27 31 2604557 - Fax: 27 31 2604609

Email: HSSREC@ukzn.ac.za

Additional consent:

I hereby provide consent to be present during the:

on-on-one interviews

Answering the interview questions

Audio-record my interviews

YES/~~NO~~

YES/~~NO~~

YES /NO

Signature of Participant

Signature of Witness

Date

Date

19/08/24

19/08/24

APPENDIX G: Interview guide

Research question: What approaches do district officials adopt when working with schools?

- 1) Who do you work with at the district office and how do you feel about working with them?
- 2) How would you describe their leadership approaches when they work with you?

Research question: How do district officials' leadership approaches affect how schools are managed?

- 3) How do they make decisions?
- 4) How do their leadership approaches affect how you manage the school?
- 5) Would you say this approach is effective in terms of how you manage and lead the school? Please explain.
- 6) Please share situations where the district support to your school was helpful or unhelpful.
- 7) Does the district do a good job in offering support to you as a manager to meet your school's needs?

Research question: How can district officials' leadership approaches be improved to positively affect how schools are managed?

- 8) What qualities should a district official have to be effective?
- 9) Based on the leadership approaches you previously mentioned, provide some suggestions on the improvements that district officials can make to their approach to leadership.
- 10) What kind of leadership would be most valuable to your school, from the district?

APPENDIX H: Turnitin Certificate

Tarana Birbal Master's Dissertation

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APPENDIX H: Language Editing Certificate

Cyril JM Clarke



Translator, Editor & Proof Reader

OUDTSHOORN 6625

South Africa

Mobile: +27

email: cyril@mweb.co.za

To Whom It May Concern

I, Cyril JM Clarke, the undersigned, a qualified editor, hereby declare that I have edited the following research report:

Title

**Leadership Approaches Adopted by District Officials and their Effect on
the Management of Schools – a Case Study of Secondary Schools in
KwaZulu-Natal**

written by

Tarana Birbal

to be submitted

in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the Degree Master of Education

to

**the School of Education (Educational Leadership Management and Policy)
at the University of KwaZulu-Natal.**

I have suggested several changes regarding the use of grammar and language in the text. I have also checked the layout of the text, the reference list and the in-text references and suggested changes in this regard. However, I cannot guarantee that all my suggested amendments have been implemented.

Kind regards

CJM Clarke

20 November 2025