



**The District Leadership Role in Supporting Teaching and Learning in South African  
Schools: Evidence from Two Districts in Gauteng Province.**

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A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in  
the Discipline of Educational Leadership Management and Policy

**College of Humanities, School of Education  
Edgewood Campus**

**December 2018**

## DECLARATION

I, Pinkie Euginia Mthembu, declare that

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### STATEMENT BY SUPERVISORS

This thesis has been submitted with/ ~~without~~ our approval.



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20. 03. 2019

Date

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## ETHICAL CLEARANCE CERTIFICATE



04 September 2018

**Ms Pinkie E Mthembu 971163600**  
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Dear Ms Mthembu

**Protocol reference number:** HSS/1765/016D

**Project title:** The district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in South African Schools: Evidence from two districts in Gauteng Province.

### **Full approval – Application for amendment**

I wish to inform you that your application dated 23 August 2018, in connection with the above has been reviewed and the protocol has now been granted full approval.

Amendments to the protocol and tools –

1. Change in project title **from** 'The leadership role of education district officials in teaching and learning in schools: Evidence from one district in KwaZulu-Natal'.
  - **To** 'The district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in South African Schools: Evidence from two districts in Gauteng Province.'
2. Change in research site **from** districts in KwaZulu-Natal.
  - **To** 'two districts in Gauteng Province'
3. Amended research instruments reflecting new site.

**Any alterations to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study must be reviewed and approved through an 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 school/department for a period of 5 years.**

**The ethical clearance certificate is only valid for a period of 3 years from the date of issue. Thereafter Recertification must be applied for on an annual basis.**

Best wishes for the successful completion of your research protocol.

Yours faithfully

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## **DEDICATION**

This thesis is dedicated to my late grandmother, Ntombenhle Paulina Majola and my late spiritual father, Bishop Dominic J. Khumalo, for the love, inspiration and, most importantly, a great sense of morality they instilled in me to be the woman I am today.

*The LORD is my strength and my shield; in Him my heart trusts, and I am helped; my heart exults, and with my song, I give thanks to him. Psalms 28:7*

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Firstly, I would like to thank God for providing me with the resilience and strength to embark on a Doctoral journey despite the many challenges along the way. Without Him, I would not have made it this far.

Secondly, this thesis would not have been what it is today if it was not for the guidance and insightfulness and care from my supervisors, **Professor Thamsanqa Bhengu and Professor Vitallis Chikoko**. I am much indebted to you for the kind of support and intellect you demonstrated in the last three years in shaping this PhD study into a product that I proudly own today.

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Lastly, I am deeply indebted to the district officials who provided me with experiential insights into district leadership. Their contributions have made me grow by enriching my understanding of this phenomenon

I love you all.

## **ABSTRACT**

This study examined the leadership role of district officials in supporting teaching and learning in schools. It explores the views of district officials in two purposively selected district offices in one province of South Africa. Studies on educational leadership have generally shown the relationship between leadership and learner outcomes. They have focused more on leadership within the school and less on that of the District Office. Because district offices lead from the middle, they are well placed to ensure that all schools improve teaching and learning. This gap in the literature on the leadership experiences of district officials has motivated this study.

This collective case study was couched within the constructivist research paradigm. It involved in-depth face-to-face individual interviews with eight officials comprising two district directors, four curriculum leaders, and two circuit managers. Supplementary data sources included document reviews and observation and accountability meetings with principals.

Framed by Open Systems, Public Education Leadership Coherence Framework and Adaptive Leadership theories, the findings of this study revealed that districts were clear about their philosophy with which they communicated to all stakeholders. They shared responsibility and accountability for learner performance with schools. In the process, the District Director and the school principals were put at the centre as enablers. It emerged that data-informed accountability and support meetings were regularly held with schools and communities to garner support for improved teaching and learning. They facilitated professional development and learning opportunities for principals, deputy principals, departmental heads and teachers.

Among the key lessons from this study is that it is essential for the district office to have a shared philosophy regarding how teaching and learning should be enhanced. However, philosophy alone is not enough. Thus meaningful strategies need to be developed drawing from that philosophy. Inclusivity in developing and implementing strategies have emerged as important. Furthermore, the study revealed that an important strategy involves operationalising multi-level structures and systems that inform and are in turn informed by various functions and practices that would harness the district-wide context. Also, it is important for district officials to be responsive to different school contexts and also help to identify partners that bolster their efforts. Thus, this study suggests that the ‘we are in it together’ philosophy between the district and the school was the backbone of the two districts’ success.

## **LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS**

ALT	Adaptive Leadership Theory
CAPS	Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement
CCEAM	Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management
CES	Chief Education Specialist
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCES	Deputy Chief Education Specialist
DD	District Director
DDD	Data-Driven Dashboard
DDDM	Data-Driven Decision-Making
DMT	District Management Team
DoE	Department of Education
DOs	District Officials
ED1	Education District 1
ED2	Education District 2
EDMT	Executive District Management Team
GET	General Education and Training
HoDs	Heads of Department (in schools)
HOD	Provincial Head of Department
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IDSO	Institutional Development Support Officer
LftM	Leadership from the Middle
MTSF	Medium Term Strategic Framework
NDP	National Development Plan
OSS	Open Systems Theory



PELP	Public Education Leadership Project
PLCs	Professional Learning Communities
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SAERA	South African Education Research Association
SMTs	School Management Teams
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisations
US	United States

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## CHAPTER 1

### ORIENTATION TO THE STUDY

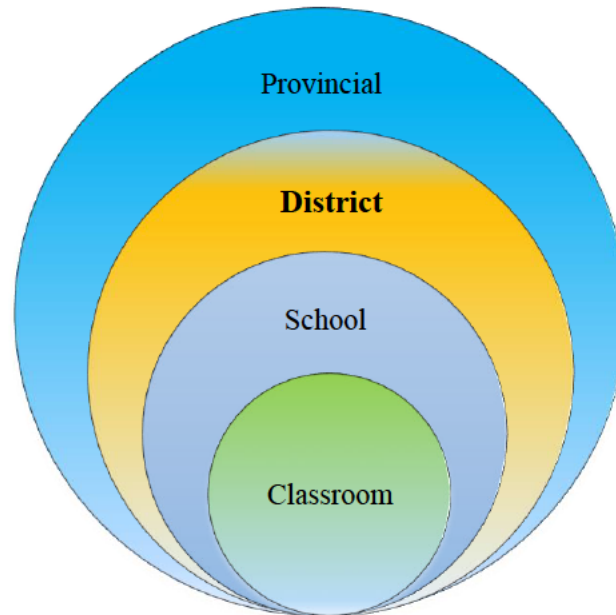
#### 1.1 Introduction and background to the study

*Districts can play a powerful role in supporting school improvement if they reposition themselves both internally to the schools they serve and externally to the greater educational environment. Internally, districts must develop a reciprocal relationship with schools, exchanging a commitment to capacity building for accountability. Externally, districts must develop the capacity to scan the broader educational environment and negotiate relationships with external providers in order to enhance the expertise within their systems. Perhaps most important, districts must evolve into organisations that explore instructional problems more systematically in order to build their knowledge base and thus to improve teaching across their systems (Supovitz, 2006, pp. 3-4).*

This statement captures the essence of the study, which sets out to examine the district leadership role of District Officials (DOs) in education to provide the necessary teaching and learning support in schools. Supovitz (2006) highlights the importance of their roles in improving learning outcomes. For administrative purposes, the Republic of South Africa (RSA) comprises nine provinces, each of which is further divided into districts, which differ in number from province to province. The province selected for this study has 15 districts. In this research, DOs refer to the senior education DOs who are members of the district management. This study contributes to intermittent but growing research in the field of education district leadership. It is a case study that sought to provide insights into the education district leaders' understanding of their role in providing teaching and learning support in schools. The study explores how DOs undertake their leadership responsibilities when providing teaching and learning support in schools.

This study assumes that DOs can play a significant role in bridging the gap in quality teaching and learning, especially in South Africa (SA), where there is considerable inequality in quality education as well as learner performance. While individual school leadership is important for large-scale improvement, all levels of the education system should focus their leadership practices on enhancing the instructional core (Childress, Elmore, Grossman, & Johnson, 2007;

City, Elmore, Fiarman, & Teitel, 2009; Elmore, 2000). Teaching and learning happen in classrooms, which exist within schools, and the latter situated within the districts. See Figure 1.1 below.



*Figure 1.1: Nested levels of the district*

Furthermore, because the core of education is teaching and learning, it means that the classroom is the heart of education. The schools are embedded within districts; therefore, the need is for district efforts to foster an environment to enable schools to work together and consequently share their expertise and resources. I consider the DOs well positioned due to their authority to foster environments that lead to improvement across the districts. In this chapter, I discuss the background of the study, the statement of the problem, the purpose of the study, as well as the research questions. Furthermore, I outline the significance of the study, clarify concepts, demarcation, highlight the theoretical framework and conclude by detailing the structure of the thesis and a summary of the chapters.

Since 1994, the South African education system has changed drastically from the inherited apartheid system that racially segregated schools into 19 departments where the majority received an inferior standard of education, leading to poor performance. This transition significantly changed the policy context for school leaders and managers. Legislation such as the South African Schools' Act (SASA) of 1996 and curriculum policies such as Curriculum

2005 based on the principles of Outcomes-Based Education (OBE) with the Curriculum Assessment Policy Statement (CAPS), aims to ensure that all learners have access to quality education (RSA, 1996; RSA, 2013). Moreover, South Africa's Basic Education budget increased from R29.4 billion in 1994 to R204 billion in 2016 (RSA, 1994, 2016a). Despite these efforts, the legacy of apartheid persists, especially in teaching and learning, as learners from previously disadvantaged backgrounds, who constitute the majority, still perform poorly (Bloch, 2009; Fleisch, 2006; Letseka, Bantwini, & King-McKenzie, 2012; Spaull, 2013). Poor performance in South African schools is evident in international and national reports. For example, SA was ranked 146 out of 148 countries in the World Economic Forum (WEF) rankings in Mathematics and Science in 2014 (Bilbao-Osorio, Dutta, & Lanvin, 2014).

Also, a report by the United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) on the progress of realising quality education in SA indicated that there is still a huge gap in learning between the rich and the poor in SA. Supporting this conclusion, (UNESCO, 2014, p. 20) reported that results in SA still show “only 14 per cent of poor adolescents achieving a minimum standard in Mathematics, comparable to the performance of poor students in Ghana, a country that has less than one-fifth of SA's wealth”. This fact is also evident in Grade 12 results and the Annual Assessment Tasks results, which show that learners in higher quintile schools perform better across all grades and subjects than learners in lower quintile schools (DBE, 2015). Ngcobo and Tikly (2008, p. 1) sum up the impact of legislation since 1994:

The government has instigated wide-ranging initiatives to transform education from its apartheid past including improved access to education... and, wide-ranging curriculum reform including the introduction of outcomes-based education. However, despite years of the reform effort, South Africa continues to lag behind in international comparisons and has failed to significantly raise the performance of historically disadvantaged learners.

The consistently poor general state of education in SA can be attributed to a variety of factors, including low-quality teaching and lack of knowledge in primary and secondary education (DBE, 2011; Taylor, 2008; Van der Berg, Taylor, Gustafsson, Spaull, & Armstrong, 2011). As a result, the South African government and the National Department of Basic Education in SA

have developed strategies and policies. These incorporate Action Plan 2014, Towards the Realisation of Schooling, 2025; National Development Plan 2030; Policy on the Organisations; Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts in SA and Medium Term Strategic Framework (MTSF) 2014–2019 (DBE, 2011; RSA, 2012, 2013, 2014). The significance of these policies and strategies is the recognition of the importance of the district office leadership role in creating quality education across schools by placing significant pressure on the DOs. Of most interest for this study is the DBE's policy on *Guidelines for the Organisation, Roles and Responsibilities of the Education Districts* developed in 2011 (RSA, 2013). The policy explicitly attempts to address existing inequality and uneven capability by delivering standards for the responsibilities of the districts, their actual authority, organisation, geographical coverage and the number of schools and circuits under their authority (RSA, 2013). Section 20 of the policy notes the following about education district offices:

Subject to provincial plans, their task is to work collaboratively with principals and educators in schools, with the vital assistance of circuit offices, to improve educational access and retention, give management and professional support, and to help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching.

According to this policy, DOs receive delegated management authority from the Provincial Education Department [PED] (RSA, 2013). This assigned role consists mainly of the “day-to-day administrative and professional dealings with schools” (RSA, 2013, p. 11). The implications of such administrative and professional dealings with schools are that the DOs oversee the management of teaching and learning in schools, among other factors. In that regard, district leaders should be assets who influence teaching and learning improvement systemically by supporting schools, especially those with poor performance. According to this policy, the roles of the DOs include assisting principals and educators in improving the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions. Furthermore, they must provide an environment to enable the professional development of educators. District offices are also expected to maintain accountability by holding education institutions in a district are responsible for their performance (RSA, 2013).

The role of education DOs is to ensure that the poor state of teaching is addressed. Also, education districts are expected to support schools by tactically coordinating their work so that

“the individual parts of the district system operate in concert with one another, as opposed to working in separate silos or competition for limited district resources” (Honig & Rainey, 2015, p. 1). Thus synergy among the different departments within the education district may improve standards in the district by supporting teaching and learning requirements in schools. Moreover, DOs are seen as one of the critical focal points in supporting schools, “especially in terms of support offered to schools, and strengthened monitoring of the curriculum at the school level to turn around learner performance” (DBE, 2015, p. 25). According to Bantwini and Diko (2011), the district offices are also perceived as policy mediators between the national and provincial departments and schools. The DOs have a central function in overseeing the execution of the policies produced by the DBE. This view seems to acknowledge the vital role that DOs could play in education in supporting schools to enhance teaching and learning. However, it is evident from the poor performance of learners, persistent inequalities and poor quality of teaching and learning that the DOs have not had the desired impact to date.

Even though the education districts are increasingly recognised as vital in supporting schools, historically, educational research has regarded these as irrelevant to teaching and learning as well as improvements in schools. Instead, they are conceptualised as impediments to school improvement and teaching and learning outcomes (Smith & O’Day, 1990; Elmore, 1993). According to Fleisch (2006, p. 219), district offices in SA continue to be “the weak link in the delivery of routine administrative services to schools...in policy implementation and improving learners’ performance.” Furthermore, Smith and O’Day (1990, p. 235) illustrate this thinking as they contend that schools are the “basic unit of change, and school [teachers and principals] are not only the agents, but also the initiators, designers, and directors of change efforts.” Hence research has mainly focused on school-based management (Smith & O’Day, 1990), which seems to apply to SA because DOs do not focus on teaching and learning, but on compliance (Elmore, 1993). Elmore (1993, p. 116) summarised the historical role of the district office as follows: “key decisions on curriculum and teaching are passed from states to districts, from districts to principals, and from principals to teachers, with little effective focus or guidance.”

While district offices are seen as unimportant in supporting and guiding schools, Waters and Marzano (2006) refute the narrative of people who work outside classrooms and schools that are perceived as irrelevant. Research by Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 20) argues that “we

have found a substantial and positive relationship between district-level leadership and student achievement when the superintendent [district head] district office staff...do the right work in the right way”. While acknowledging that examples of ineffective school district offices exist, Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 8) argue:

Our research does not support Mr Bennett’s broad-stroke condemnation of ... district office staff... To the contrary, our findings indicate that when district leaders effectively address specific responsibilities, they can have a profound, positive impact on student achievement in their districts.

Furthermore, a growing body of research has emerged in developed countries focusing on school district leadership efforts that aim to support teaching and learning to improve learning outcomes (Honig, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009). For example, a meta-analysis conducted by Marzano and Waters (2009) focused on the link between district leadership and learner performance. This study identified district-level leadership responsibilities or initiatives with a statistically significant impact on learner achievement. These responsibilities included ensuring collaborative goal setting, establishing non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction, monitoring achievement and instruction goals, and allocating resources to support these goals. Marzano and Waters (2009) further establish that a substantial amount of data supports the belief that district leadership is a critical component for effective schooling.

Additionally, successful school districts developed what Marzano and Waters (2009, p. 8) refer to as defined autonomy by which district heads “expect principals and all other officials in the district to lead within the boundaries defined by the district goals.” Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 13) believe that when district leadership “encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility; to establish a relationship with schools.” This study ascertains what the DOs understand as their role in realising these significant responsibilities and examining what they know to be their role and practice in supporting teaching and learning in schools. Another comparative case study of three school districts in the United States of America (USA) by Honig Copland, Rainey, Lorton, and Newton (2010, p. iii) was undertaken to “uncover the daily work practices and activities of [district] central office administrators as they sought...to transform the central office into a support system to help all school improve

teaching and learning”. Honig et al. (2010) established that district offices have crucial roles in developing district-wide support systems for improving teaching and learning and recommend additional research related to how specific leadership roles at the district office build capacity with leaders at the school level. According to Honig et al. (2010), the importance of partnerships and the interface between district office staff and school principals is vital for district-wide improvement.

While there are strides in the development of district leadership in developed countries, developing countries still lag behind. However, intermittent literature gives some explanation concerning the important roles DOs could play in supporting teaching and learning. Also, in SA, the significance of districts and school improvement was emphasised recently by several scholars (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Khosa, Mashamaite, & Ntantiso, 2013; Mavuso, 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2015; Narsee, 2006; Taylor, 2008). This literature concurs that districts can only positively impact teaching and learning at the classroom and school level if their leadership roles are centralised in supporting schools. Furthermore, it indicates that the fundamental role of district offices is to ensure quality in schools by providing professional support to enhance teaching and learning (Narsee, 2006; Diko, Haupt, & Molefe, 2011). However, this does seem to be taking place. For example, South African studies conducted by Bhengu, Naicker, and Mthiyane (2014; see also Naicker, Chikoko & Mthiyane, 2013) on the role of principals in leading teaching and learning in challenging contexts reveal, among other barriers, a lack of or little support from education DOs. Also, Mavuso (2013) conducted a case study of two districts in the Eastern Cape Province of SA on the roles of DOs in supporting teaching and learning. This study established that district-based officials understood and practised their support for schools in administrative tasks, mainly consisting of monitoring policy implementation and resource provision to schools. School management saw district officers’ visits as focusing on compliance rather than support. Mavuso (2013) also found that schools perceived DOs as working incoherently and providing different communications to them, despite their claims of working together. This study was conducted in one of the worst-performing districts. While these findings are significant, it seemed fitting to focus on the districts in the province which have performed well compared to most districts in SA.

The previous discussion reveals that sporadic attention on the district as a unit of study has resulted in a lack of understanding of district leadership in supporting teaching and learning

(Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). Moreover, the system's view of leadership does not examine individual schools but is central due to the complexity of education for students. Fullan and Sharratt (2009, p. 157) conceptualise educational leadership of this era to be the district leadership that "achieves substantial improvement under challenging circumstances [while] maintaining organisational momentum for continuous improvement." Furthermore, Honig et al. (2010) assert that districts have a crucial role in supporting instructional reform by enabling improved environments for teaching and learning. One method is to ensure that district leaders support the core business of schools, namely, teaching and learning for improved learning outcomes, through their collaboration with the schools. While this has occurred, there has been more focus on school-level leadership at the expense of the DOs' involvement in supporting teaching and learning, and this has created a void in the literature on district leadership.

## **1.2 Statement of the problem and purpose of the study**

Research on educational leadership demonstrates relationships between leaders who focus on managing teaching and learning and learner success (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Louis et al., 2010; Naicker et al., 2013; Robinson, Lloyd, & Rowe, 2008). However, the emphasis has been on individual school leadership and less on the school districts' role in supporting curriculum reforms and turning around low-achieving schools. The focus has been on principals having a positive and significant effect on learner achievement (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Bhengu et al., 2014; Naicker et al., 2013). However, this has not translated to improving school systems, generally resulting in inconsistent outcomes that are not sustainable (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Harris, 2010). Hence, there is a need to examine other levels in the education system, in this case, district leadership. Lambert (2003; see also Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003) asserts that if school improvement activities are carried out one school at a time, it is unlikely that system-wide improvement would be realised. In support of this view, Lezotte (2010, p. 15) observes:

If creating and maintaining schools as effective is not a district-wide priority, the school will likely not be able to maintain its effectiveness status. Without broader based organisational support, school effectiveness tends to depend too heavily on the heroic commitment of the school leader or only a few staff. We have numerous cases where the principal of any effective school moved on for one reason or



another and was replaced by someone who did not share the passion, vision or values. When this happened, the school usually, and quickly I might add, returned to its earlier state.

In the same vein, Supovitz (2006) posits that the vacuum of instructional leadership at the district level is a large determining factor in the quality of learning opportunities that learners receive from different schools and classroom to classroom. Hence, the inequalities in student opportunities to learn become evident. However, as Honig (2012) points out, little is known about how the central office can facilitate that work in a way to respond to the capacities of the various principals. Second, the studies reveal how the principals' interactions with the district office facilitate or impede the implementation of district-wide reforms (Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010). Enhancing teaching and learning and learner achievement across schools necessitates looking at how education districts can best be structured to support schools to meet unique learner needs while maintaining alignment and system coherence (Zavadsky, 2013). Therefore, challenges to achieving the requirements of National Development Plan (NDP) 2030, Action Plan 2025 and UNESCO targets of quality education and closing the achievement gap demand reconsidering the school districts' roles, responsibilities, and practices. It is evident that chronically underperforming schools cannot turn around without improved school districts (DBE, 2015). According to the policy on the roles and responsibilities of education districts, one of their key responsibilities is to support schools concerning the strengthening and monitoring of the curriculum to improve learner performance (RSA, 2013). However, this has not happened as districts continue to be the weak link in supporting teaching and learning (DBE, 2015).

From the preceding discussion, it appears that focusing individually on schools might not assist in large-scale improvement as imposed by current reform demands (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2003; Lambert, 2003; Fullan, 2007). This is a critical proposition considering that schools in SA are located within districts; thus, district offices provide significant local control and support to their schools (RSA, 2013). However, there are only limited studies on district leadership roles in supporting teaching and learning in the South African context and internationally. These studies indicate that district offices can only be successful in having an impact on the improvement of teaching and learning in the classroom and school level if they prioritise their role in supporting teaching and learning in schools (Bantwini & Diko, 2011;

Honig et al., 2010; Mavuso, 2013; Narsee, 2006; Rorrer et al., 2008; RSA, 2013). Moreover, these studies suggest that the schools' district leadership role in SA has been widely neglected and needs attention (Chinsamy, 2013; Fleisch, 2006; Narsee, 2006).

As a result, not enough is known about how DOs function or organise themselves to support schools to determine their influence on effective teaching and learning in schools. With the district office acting as the intermediary and interface between the head office and schools, it is essential for this study to examine the understanding of the functions of district office leadership, especially in supporting schools for teaching and learning. This does not suggest that district leaders have a direct role in learner achievement; however, their involvement in supporting teaching and learning for system-wide learning outcomes cannot be disregarded. It is, therefore, important to examine how district leaders coordinate their support for teaching and learning to provide practical guidance on how DOs could make system-wide changes in their districts (Rorrer et al., 2008).

Against this backdrop, this study explores the DOs' understanding of their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. For this study, the leadership role is about what DOs believe and understand to be their role, which would, in turn, inform their practices. Therefore, this research sought to examine how district leaders understand their leadership practices within the district's sub-units that support teaching and learning across all schools in their locality. Subsequently, this study characterises what could be learned from the district leadership role of DOs in supporting teaching and learning in schools.

### **1.3 Objectives of the study**

1. To examine the DOs' understanding of their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in one province in South Africa.
2. To describe the DOs' experience in practising their role in supporting teaching and learning in one province in South Africa.
3. To explain what we can learn from the leadership role of DOs in supporting teaching and learning in one province in South Africa.

## **1.4 Research questions**

1. How do education DOs understand their role in supporting teaching and learning in one province in South Africa?
2. How do education DOs experience practising their leadership role in seeking to support teaching and learning in one province in South Africa?
3. What can we learn from the DOs' understanding and practices regarding the leadership role a district can play in supporting teaching and learning in one province in South Africa?

## **1.5 Significance of the study**

Several compelling reasons motivated this study. Firstly, curriculum reforms and the focus on learner achievement in SA since its inception have placed pressure on all levels of the public school system to improve learning outcomes (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). Hence, exploring the district leaders' conceptualisation of the responsibility of district leadership is an essential starting point in sourcing leadership capacity at all levels while addressing the NDP 2030 mandate of improving education for all. With a national focus on raising achievement for all students, there is increasing attention on the role of district-level leaders in improving the quality and outcomes of education (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Darling-Hammond, LaPointe, Meyerson, Orr, & Cohen, 2007). However, there is a dearth of research studies informing districts on topics such as the role of district leadership in supporting teaching and learning improvement. This study also explored a substantive area about which little is known; these are the perspectives and practices of district-level leaders in their leadership role and on how they coordinate support to support the principals' leadership of teaching and learning.

Secondly, the findings of this study may provide a meaningful guide for further conversation, reflection, and future research on how district officials can positively affect student achievement in their schools. Lastly, findings may add to the body of knowledge by revealing barriers and opportunities that district leaders face as they strive to influence and manage teaching and learning in schools. Thus, examining district leaders' perspectives about existing support for teaching and learning is crucial since they are expected to be conversant with issues that facilitate or hinder successful teaching and learning at the district level (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Understanding such issues could potentially bridge the existing gap between theory and

practice and, therefore, promote coherent teaching and learning improvement. As noted above, this conceptual discussion on district leadership in supporting the school to improve teaching and learning reveals the need for this study. For instance, Bantwini and Diko (2011) suggest that more research focusing on school districts and their roles should be undertaken to discover the issues requiring immediate attention to address the schooling crisis that confronts SA. Furthermore, this brief conceptual discussion shows that district leaders are crucial stakeholders in the education system and are entrusted with the responsibility of coordinating support across all schools. However, there is inadequate research focusing on coordinated practices of the district leaders in supporting schools for teaching and learning improvement.

## **1.6 Clarification of concepts**

Clarifying the concepts in this study is crucial because some terms may have different meanings and may be understood differently in other contexts and disciplines. As a result, I decided to clarify the main concepts pertinent to the subject of this study. These include teaching and learning, leadership and management, education district office, district leadership, and the district office. A discussion of these concepts follows below:

### **1.6.1 Educational leadership**

For this study, I proposed educational leadership as a practice that mobilises people within the education system to meet adaptive challenges to positively influence the complex pursuit of improving teaching and learning (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; Heifetz & Linsky, 2004). I, therefore, adopt adaptive leadership as I view leadership as a practice that “mobilise people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz, Linsky, & Grashow, 2009, p. 14). Linsky and Lawrence (2011) and Yukl & Mahsud (2010) contend that the challenges facing education are complex; thus, it is problematic for leaders who think that there are easy answers to these challenges. I believe adaptive leadership theory is suitable for this study because, while this leadership theory acknowledges the importance of the leader-follower relationship, it also foregrounds leaders' relationship with the contextual environment (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010; Heifetz et al., 2009). From this discussion, I envisage that adaptive leadership can provide insight into how DOs understand and practice in pursuit of supporting teaching and learning in schools.

### **1.6.2 Education district office**

In this study, I view district offices as “an organised collective constituted by the [district director], the [district] office administration, and principals, who collectively serve as a network and critical link to uniting the district and the schools in ways to both develop and implement solutions to identified problems” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 333). Therefore, education district offices play a critical role in mediating between schools and other layers of the education system and government (Anderson, 2003). Their function is to ensure that, among others, delivery of teaching and learning and learner academic performance improvement is upheld. According to the policy of the district office, this is the management sub-unit of the Provincial Department of Education and is responsible for all schools in the district and may be further divided into circuit offices headed by circuit managers (RSA, 2013).

### **1.6.3 District as an open system**

This study conceptualises education districts as open systems with characteristics that “cannot be understood as a function of its isolated components ... the system does not depend on what each part is doing but on how each part is interacting with the rest ...” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Kofman & Senge, 1995, p. 27; Scott, 2003). Senge, Hamilton and Kania (2015, p. 28) postulate that one of the core capabilities of this system, in this case, DOs “...foster collective leadership as the ability to see the larger system instead of focusing on the individual parts that most visible from their own vantage point”. Therefore, building a shared understanding of complex problems is essential (Senge et al., 2015). The role of the districts in providing synergy within the education district office and across the district is significant in this study. This is because the organisational subsystems, in this case, district sub-directorates and schools within the district, cannot operate in isolation (Senge et al., 2012).

### **1.6.4 District leadership role**

This study agrees with the declaration by Smith and Erwin (2005) on conceptualising ‘role’ based on three basic assumptions in any ‘role’, which are role conception, expectation and behaviour. Here, role conception and role behaviour seem to be most relevant. Role conception is deemed to be what a person considers to be his or her role, the role description and how the individual is instructed to undertake it. This research examines the DOs’ understanding of their

leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. Role behaviour is how the person practices and carries out the related tasks, and this study examines how the experience of the DOs in their practices. Also, data from the documents and observations further reveal how DOs operate in their roles. This district leadership role is concerned with how they emerge and function in everyday situations, and both shape and is shaped by the actions of leaders (Bolden, 2010). For this study, the focus was on leadership roles and practices of the DOs in supporting teaching and learning in schools. The focus was on how the DOs understand their role as well as their actions to improve learning outcomes.

### **1.6.5 District officials**

For this study, DOs are the personnel located in the central office of each district whose leadership role, according to the national policy, is to support schools within their district with regards to teaching and learning (RSA, 2013). There are some officials in the district office with other roles; however, for this study, these officials include:

1. The District Director, the head of the district who has delegated authority from the provincial head.
2. Chief Education Specialist (CES) [Circuit Manager].
3. CES (Curriculum Support - Curriculum Learning and Implementation [CLI]) – Both General Education and Training (GET) Phase and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase. These officials report to the District Director.
4. Deputy Chief Education Specialist (DCES) (Curriculum Support), both GET and FET, who report directly to the CES (CLI), GET and FET, respectively.

In this research, DOs were conceptualised as the District Director, CES (Circuit Manager), CES (CLI) and DCES (CLI). In this regard, the focus was on the District Management Team (DMT), which included the District Director, CESs as well as DCES in Curriculum Support (CLI).

### **1.6.6 Teaching and learning**

In this study, I envisioned teaching and learning as the instructional core representing the critical work of realising learning outcomes for learners across all schools. This core involves three interconnected components: the teachers' knowledge and skills, students' engagement,

and academically challenging content (Childress et al., 2007). Hence, this study sought to ascertain the understanding of the DOs regarding their leadership role in enhancing teachers' knowledge and skills, level of content in the classroom and students' learning.

### **1.7 Limitations of the study**

By definition, a case study examines a bounded system; it is, therefore, somehow limiting (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). While I attempted to ensure that thick and rich descriptions were fundamental to this study, findings were difficult to generalise due to the limitations of the case study design, which then constrained their application to other instances. The focus on the leadership role of DOs in supporting teaching and learning in two cases in district offices was restrictive. The purposeful sampling of participants interviewed limited the study. District Officials selected were perceived as supporting schools in the selected province and able to share their experiences related to their role of supporting teaching and learning. Participants did not include other district community members or other sub-directorates in the district offices. There is a more detailed discussion about the cases, participants and other defining factors discussed in Chapter 4.

### **1.8 Delimitations**

For a researcher, it is important to highlight the scope and parameters within which to conduct the study. Firstly, this study was limited to two selected education districts in one province and focused exclusively on DOs who, at the time of the research, were members of the district management teams. Additionally, only district directors, circuit managers, and curriculum support officials in the CLI unit of the district office were interviewed, as discussed in Section 1.6.5. The time frame for this study was three years, during which the researcher undertook the PhD study.

### **1.9 Assumptions**

The assumption is that although some schools are improving and others performing well, this has not translated to a broader improvement across all schools and is evident in the persistent differences in achievement records. As a result, studies need to look at system-level leadership, especially DOs, as they are close to schools. Moreover, due to the complexity of the district offices and their intermediary role in ensuring that mandates from the national and provincial

departments are realised, more district office leadership research is needed. Also, there is a need to consider schools that are diverse in terms of geographical, social and performance contexts. The importance of the need to adapt leadership activities cannot be overemphasised, and DOs are the assets that can leverage teaching and learning improvement systemically. As Harris (2010) and Fullan (2007) note, focusing research on individual schools will not lead to comprehensive and sustained improvement.

The researcher has worked for the Department of Education (DoE) as a teacher, head of department and deputy principal and during these periods had to interact with DOs. In many cases, it appeared that the DOs did not understand their role, and often, referrals to different offices with DOs occurred seemingly in an attempt to shift the responsibility. For example, when certain subjects were challenging in a school, the DOs, specifically curriculum specialists, were unwilling to support educators. When the matter was referred to the circuit manager, he could not assist because he would state that he could not attend to curriculum matters. This is just one instance whereby there were challenges for the school to receive support from the district office. This example creates the impression that the DOs' roles were not aligned, or district leaders did not coordinate their roles in supporting schools leading to the interest in studying the district office leadership. Such a lack of support from the district office triggered my interest in this study.

### **1.10 Organisation of the study**

This study is organised into seven chapters. Chapter 1 introduces and discusses the context of the study and background to the study and presents the statement of the problem. Furthermore, it describes the purpose of the study, research questions, objectives, and significance of the study. Also, it discusses a brief theoretical framework, definition of the concepts and assumptions underpinning the study. Chapter 2 presents the literature related to the study on the conceptual issues and empirical studies on the district leadership role in the context of supporting teaching and learning. Chapter 3 discusses the theoretical framework that underpinned the study, including the Public Educational Leadership Framework and Adaptive Leadership Theory. Chapter 4 describes the methodology of the study and locates it within the field of qualitative research and interpretive paradigm. It also includes a detailed discussion of the interpretive paradigm, case study research design, research sites, data generation, and



analysis strategies. Trustworthiness, ethical issues, and limitations are outlined in the same chapter. Chapter 5 presents and discusses findings related to how DOs understood their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. The first research question guided this chapter. Chapter 6 presents and discusses findings on the instructional leadership practices of DOs for supporting teaching and learning. Chapter 7 summarises the study, discusses the conclusions drawn from the findings, and discusses the recommendations for research that arose from the study.

### **1.11 Chapter summary**

In this chapter, the study's orientation is presented, primarily including the background and the statement of the problem to explain why there is a need for research on education DOs' leadership in supporting teaching and learning in schools. The objectives of the study, as well as the research questions, are also discussed. Subsequently, the applicable concepts are described as well as the significance, limitations, and delimitations of the study. Finally, there is an outline of the overall structure of the thesis. The impression that emerges from this chapter is the need for more studies on the role of DOs in supporting teaching and learning. In the next chapter, there is a review of the literature on the education district leadership in supporting teaching and learning, which include conceptual issues as well as empirical studies on the leadership roles and practices of DOs in this type of support.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **SOME LITERATURE ON EDUCATION DISTRICT LEADERSHIP**

#### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents a review of both international and South African literature on the district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning and is organised into five sections. The chapter begins with a conceptual discussion of educational leadership, leading to a more in-depth discussion on educational leadership. The second section is a general overview of conceptual issues related to educational leadership that focus on teaching and learning. In keeping with this, the third and fourth sections present a conceptual discussion as well as review the empirical studies on district leadership role and practices that support teaching and learning. I then conclude by reviewing the literature concerning the challenges of district leadership. Even though I attempt to present literature that covers a wide range of empirical work on the district leadership phenomenon, only a limited range of local studies is available.

#### **2.2 Conceptualising the term ‘educational leadership.’**

Despite decades of research resulting in extensive debates about leadership, understanding the theoretical issues on leadership is complex. For example, Bennis and Nanus (1997) suggest that “leadership is the most studied and least understood concept ...in the social sciences.” Similarly, Stogdill (1974, p. 259) posits that there are “almost as many definitions of leadership as there are persons who have attempted to define the concept.” DuFour and Marzano (2011, pp. 2-3) suggest that “leadership is ultimately about the ability to influence others” and that “it will take a collaborative effort and widely dispersed leadership to meet the challenges confronting our schools.” These authors also state that effective district leaders “hold themselves accountable for shaping the outcome with their actions” and “identify a few key priorities and pursue them relentlessly” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 40).

Knapp, Honig, Plecki, Portin, and Copland (2014) conceptualise leadership as the collective effort and commitments that shape the direction of a school or district and its learning improvement programmes while engaging in the pursuit of those programmes. They believe that conceptualising leadership as collective work seems more appropriate than viewing leadership as positional. From the above discussion, there seem to be a plethora of ways in

which scholars may understand leadership. However, it seems befitting to define educational leadership by focusing on the moral purpose of teaching and learning, resulting in learning improvement (Fullan, 2007). Hopkins (2007, p. 14) suggests that educational leadership should be more directed to teaching and learning improvement and “define everything else as instrumental to it.” He justifies his position by stating that most educational leadership literature proposes that leaders should characterise all the traits and skills that remedy the weaknesses of the schools wherein they work. Hopkins (2007, p. 14) further elaborates:

If we put improvement of practice and performance at the centre of our theory of leadership, then these other theories...must shift to theories about the possible skills and knowledge that leaders would have to possess to operate as agents of large scale instructional improvement...the skills and knowledge that matter are those that bear on the creation of settings for learning focused on clear expectations for instruction. All other skills are instrumental.

Similarly, Elmore (2004) contends that the purpose of educational leadership is to improve instructional practices and performance. He believes that it has four dimensions; firstly, for teaching and learning to improve, continuous learning is vital. Secondly, learning requires modelling. Third, the roles and activities of leadership need to “flow from the expertise required for learning and improvement, and not from the institution's formal dictates” (Elmore, 2004, p. 8). Lastly, exercising authority requires reciprocal accountability and capacity. That is, the districts hold the principals accountable for improved learner performance and correspondingly provide the necessary resources and support to teachers who must account for their performance. However, for effective districts, teachers should enjoy “some latitude within specific parameters and the unique context of an individual school was recognised” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 30).

Elmore (2004) concludes that the definition of leadership should underpin the guidance and direction of instructional improvement. By implication, leadership practices and behaviours should be adapted to focus on teaching and learning in schools, which is the moral purpose of education (Fullan, 2007). However, Hopkins (2007) asserts that the core of educational leadership practice is about mobilising people to meet adaptive challenges, positively affecting student learning. Linsky and Lawrence (2011) contend that the challenges facing education are

complex; thus, it is problematic for leaders who think that there are easy answers to these challenges. Therefore, leadership research must focus mainly on leadership activity or practice with perspiration aspects instead of leadership traits, which have inspirational aspects (Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). From this discussion, I envisage that educational leadership can provide insight into how DOs understand and practice in pursuit of supporting teaching and learning in schools.

### **2.2.1 Educational leadership for teaching and learning**

Research on educational leadership also highlights a relationship between leadership focused on outcomes and student success (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Louis et al., 2010). Moreover, research exploring the relationship between leadership and student learning has shown implications for the principal's role (Elmore, 2000; Louis et al., 2010). Darling-Hammond et al. (2007, p. 9) support this and argue that education leaders influence learning outcomes by developing practices that influence the organisational conditions of the school". Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, and Wahlstrom (2004) also conducted a study on how leadership influences student learning. This study concluded that leadership was the second most important school-based factor in children's academic achievement. They also observed that there were few cases of problem schools that could turn around without effective leaders. Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 70) conducted a study that concluded:

There seems little doubt that both district and school leadership provide a critical bridge between most educational reform initiatives and their consequences for students. Of all the factors that contribute to what students learn at school, present evidence led us to the conclusion that leadership is second in strength only to classroom instruction.

Barber and Mourshed (2007, p. 38) also reported on the world best performing schools globally and supported this assertion by concluding that:

There is not a single documented case of a school successfully turning around its pupil achievement trajectory in the absence of talented leadership. Similarly, we did not find a single school system that had improved in its performance that did not possess sustained, committed, and talented leadership

Another large-scale study on the link between educational leadership and student learning by Louis et al. (2010, p. 7) aimed to identify “the nature of successful educational leadership and to understand better how such leadership can improve educational practices and student learning.” District leaders focus on learning, teaching, curriculum, and assessment as well as the capability of all other aspects of schooling to support the instructional core and improved student learning. This assertion aligns with the conception of the teaching and learning instructional core defined in Chapter 1. Hoy and Miskel (2008, p. 42) refer to the instructional core as the organisational activity system that produces the actual “product” of the organisation. Theorising the instructional core, City et al. (2009, see also Childress et al., 2007) suggest that it involves the teacher and the student in the presence of content. The idea is that school improvement becomes possible when there are interactions between teachers, students, and content in the classroom. According to these authors, improving student learning at scale is threefold. That is, the level of the content taught to students, the teacher's skill and content knowledge, and the level of students’ active learning of the content. According to Robinson et al. (2008), if leaders focus their relationships, work, and learning more on the core business of teaching and learning, their influence on student outcomes would be great. She states that this student-focused leadership makes a difference in the equity and excellence of student outcomes.

There are also views that while district offices are essential, they are ill-equipped to support schools, especially in improving teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015). One of the primary reasons DOs find it challenging to focus on teaching and learning is the complexity of the work involved in teaching and learning. The reason is the environment in which teaching and learning occur, as it is unpredictable and dispersed across many classrooms (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Thus, DOs withdraw from teaching and learning issues and focus their energies on operations (Elmore, 1993). Elmore (1993, p. 116) summarises the historical role of the district office as “[K]ey decisions on curriculum and teaching are passed from states to districts, from districts to principals, and from principals to teachers, with little effective focus or guidance.”

What seems to emerge in this section is the importance for educational leaders to prioritise the critical task of supporting teaching and learning. The discussion reaffirms the need to focus on the core, which is the task in the classroom. It indicates that regardless of the education system

level, leaders cannot lose sight of the fact that their existence is primarily on the critical task of teaching and learning. The discussion also indicates that this core coherently comprises three elements: a teacher, learner, and content. In this study, it seems appropriate that I examine how DOs practice their leadership in supporting teaching and learning and what they understand as their role as district leaders. In the following section, I discuss the importance of district leadership in leading and supporting teaching and learning.

### **2.3 Why district officials matter in the context of leading teaching and learning**

Internationally and to a limited extent, locally, recent research has been undertaken on district's leadership role in supporting teaching and learning (Anderson, Mascall, & Stiegelbauer, 2012; Bantwini, 2018; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Mavuso, 2013; Rorrer et al., 2008). This research highlights the importance of district offices to the improvement of teaching and learning at scale and has begun to provide guides for district office leaders to realise such results (Honig, Venkateswaran, & McNeil, 2017; Hubbard, Mehan, & Stein, 2006). These district leaders are aware that “improving teaching and learning across a district is a systems problem, demanding engagement of people throughout schools and central offices in coordinated efforts to realise ambitious teaching and learning improvement goals for all students” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 2). Also, Marzano and Waters (2009) conducted a meta-analysis on the link between district leadership and learner achievement. They found that “when district leaders are carrying out their leadership responsibilities effectively, student achievement across the district is positively affected” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 5). This study identified district-level leadership responsibilities or initiatives with a statistically significant impact on learner achievement. These authors conceptualised five district leadership functions, which they assumed to be “a new view of district leadership—one that assumes district leadership can be a critical component of effective schooling” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 13). These included:

1. A collaborative goal setting to include all relevant stakeholders in establishing goals for the district.
2. The non-negotiable goals for achievement and instruction by ensuring that the collaborative goal-setting process results in non-negotiable goals, which include achievement targets and research-based instructional strategies.

3. Ensuring that the goals are the primary focus of the district's effort and no other initiative detract attention or resources from accomplishing the goals.
4. Ensuring that there is the monitoring of goals for achievement and instruction and continuous monitoring of progress.
5. Allocating and using resources to support the achievement and accomplishment of instructional goals.

Also, successful school districts developed what Marzano and Waters (2009, p. 8) referred to as “defined autonomy” by which district office leaders “expect...principals and all other officials in the district to lead within the boundaries defined by the district goals.” Waters and Marzano (2006, p. 13) state that when district leadership “encourages strong school-level leadership and encourages principals and others to assume responsibility for school success, he or she has fulfilled another responsibility; to establish a relationship with schools.” They further suggest that poor or ineffective district leader-principal relationships affect learner achievement negatively. Marzano and Waters (2009) found that district-level leadership matters when DOs set clear, non-negotiable goals for teaching and learning while providing school leadership teams with the responsibility and authority on how to realise those goals. These findings suggest that student achievement is enhanced when district leaders focus their support on schools.

A study by Louis et al. (2010) sought to ascertain the links between the school, district offices and state-level leadership with improving teaching and learning. This analysis found that district leaders who improved teaching and learning developed shared expectations for teaching and learning. These leaders differentiated support to schools, including capacity development for principals. Louis et al. (2010) found that when district units coordinated their practices and worked “more interdependently than independently in relation to district-wide and school-specific needs,” they were more effective in supporting schools (Louis et al., 2010, p. 210).

Another in-depth qualitative case study of three school districts was conducted in the United States (US) by Honig et al. (2010, p. iii). This study investigated how to “uncover the daily work practices and activities of [district] central office administrators as they sought...to transform the central office into a support system to help all schools improve teaching and

learning” (Honig et al., 2010, p. iii). Findings demonstrated that DOs play vital roles in developing district-wide support systems for improving teaching and learning. These authors found that there was a gap in research on how specific leadership roles at the district office build capacity for leaders at the school level. Honig et al. (2010, p. v) identified several dimensions where urban school district leaders transformed their work to improve their schools' teaching and learning outcomes. These dimensions included learning-focused partnerships with school principals to deepen principals' instructional leadership practice. Secondly, they included reorganising and reculturing each district office unit to support the central office-principal partnerships and teaching and learning improvements. Thirdly, stewardship of the overall central office transformation process. Lastly, the use of evidence across the district office to support the continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools. Findings from the study revealed that, in order to meet the needs of schools, there is a need for a collective approach by district offices and schools. Furthermore, these scholars found that deliberately combining principals and officials' work across the district office reinforced what works and detected what was not working. In this way, district leaders can provide resources more appropriately (Honig et al., 2010).

Moreover, district leaders play an essential role in “setting the tone for the district by influencing subordinates' norms and practices, setting the vision and devoting the time to key activities” (Roberts, 2001, p. 11). Even though this does not imply that district leaders are prerequisites of educational leadership for the education system, sustained and effective district leadership is important for system-wide learner achievement (Rorrer et al., 2008). District leaders also have a role in developing the vision and managing internal processes to support the attainment of that vision. Furthermore, Murphy and Hallinger (1988, p. 178) note the importance of strong leadership by district leaders that is to set “school system goals, selecting district-wide staff development activities and in pressing for district-school goal coordination and in supervising and evaluating principals.” Section 2.5 to follow further discusses these practices. Likewise, Fullan (2007) states that district leaders play a vital role in enhancing quality in the education district by fostering a commitment throughout the school district on improving learning outcomes and closing the gap in student learning, a moral purpose of education.



Honig (2012) examined the relationship between district leaders and principals in three large urban school districts in the US about instructional leadership. Drawing from 283 interviews and 265 hours of observation, Honig (2012) identifies district office administrators' practices to support principals' instructional leadership development. These included engaging in joint work, differentiating support for principals, modelling thinking and actions, providing tools to assess quality teaching and learning, and brokering resources and tensions between the district offices and schools. The scholar concludes that district office administrators need to support teaching and learning as instructional leaders when supporting principals and schools. In analysing the literature on district leadership, Anderson et al. (2012) posited that district support is not only about district intervention in schools, but it also encompasses three types of intervention strategies. The first strategy is developing district office capacity to adapt assistance to school-specific circumstances and needs. The second strategy is to develop the school personnel's capacity to understand and solve their problems guided by the district policies and expectations. The last strategy is creating systems to facilitate networking and sharing among school personnel about school improvement issues and practices rather than depending on the district for solutions (Anderson et al., 2012).

As discussed in Chapter 1, schools are located in districts, which in turn, are embedded in the province. As a result, districts become a lever that could enhance coherence between schools and the system. Fullan (2015) refers to district leadership as Leadership from the Middle (LftM) and defines LftM “as a deliberate strategy that increases the capacity and internal coherence of the middle. It then becomes a more effective partner upward to the state and downward to its schools and communities to pursue greater system performance. As a result, LftM develops greater overall system coherence by strengthening the focus of the middle in relation to system goals and local needs” (Fullan, 2015, p.1). LftM is, therefore, a connected strategy and an isolated strategy. Fullan (2015, p. 1) further justifies his assertion:

This approach is powerful because it mobilises the middle (districts and/or networks of schools), thus developing widespread capacity, while at the same time the middle works with its schools more effectively and becomes a better and more influential partner upward to the centre.

According to Hargreaves and Ainscow (2015), LftM involves districts working collaboratively. They further elaborate: “In this leading from the middle approach, districts do not just mediate and manage other people’s reforms individually; they become the collective drivers of change and improvement together” (Hargreaves & Ainscow, 2015, p. 44). These quotes suggest that district offices leadership could serve as a lever that could enhance coherence across all schools improving learning outcomes on a large scale. Drawing from the literature, Levin, Datnow & Carrier (2012) highlight district characteristics that they find pertinent to supporting innovative approaches in general and student-centred learning approaches in particular. The characteristics provide a clear leadership focus on improving student learning, commitment to equity and excellence, and combining top-down support with bottom-up innovation.

Relating to the effects of the district role on learner achievement, Mourshed, Chijioke and Barber (2010, p. 81) concluded:

What happens in schools and classrooms has to always be the focus... However, in retrospect, we could have recognised earlier how important the local education authorities were to improving what happened in schools and classrooms across the system. Once we figured that out, it made a big difference. In several systems where the mediating layer already existed, its role in delivering improvement was strengthened.

According to Mourshed et al. (2010), DOs typically have three tasks. Firstly, they provide targeted support to schools. Secondly, they act as a buffer between the centre and the schools while interpreting and communicating the improvement objectives to manage any resistance to change. Lastly, they enhance the collaborative exchange between schools by facilitating the sharing of best practices between schools, helping them to support each other, share learning, and standardise practices. In a study on improved nations, which included one South African province, Mourshed et al. (2010) further indicated that positioning of the districts is crucial in meeting the schools and communities' educational objectives and needs. Supporting this assertion, Christie, Butler, and Potterton (2007, p. 85) postulate “[w]ithout a thorough and ongoing relationship with the district office, which would include training, advice, and

inspections, an important part of the systemic accountability and improvement in the system is missing.”

In their meta-analysis of 27 studies completed or reported between 1970 and 2003, Marzano and Waters (2009) concluded that district leadership has a determinate and distinctive relationship to student achievement. These scholars noted that their findings “stand in sharp contrast to the notion that district administration is a part of an amorphous blob that soaks up valuable resources without adding value to a district’s effectiveness” (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 5). Thus, their findings suggest that student achievement is positively affected across the district when district leaders effectively carry out their leadership responsibilities.

Referring to SA, Khosa et al. (2013) highlighted the centrality of the district-level in the day-to-day delivery of the education services as outlined in the national and provincial programmes and policies. However, they observed that there is still uncertainty concerning the role and responsibilities of the district leadership. These included, among others, the districts’ scope regarding the norms and standards, education circuits, the resources, geographical coverage, and the authority held by these leaders. Since the district is the one level that is fundamental to implementing these improvement reforms, districts serve as an interface between the provincial level and the schools within its periphery. In that way, they are “birectional in nature” (Khosa et al., 2013, p. 90).

Moreover, the meta-analysis study by Leithwood (2010) identified the characteristics of school districts that are successful in closing the gap among diverse groups, including those in challenging circumstances. Among others, districts widely focus on student achievement by developing widely shared beliefs and a vision. Their beliefs include the concepts of closing the gap in learner achievement and improvement across all schools (Rorrer et al., 2008; Leithwood, 2010). They also show a sense of efficacy as significant among staff in accounting for student achievement.

### **2.3.1 District collective efficacy for improving teaching and learning**

There is evidence in the extant literature that for effective district leadership, DOs need to convey a strong belief about their own and their colleagues’ capabilities to accomplish quality learning outcomes for all students. Specifically, district leaders' ability to maintain their

perceptions and beliefs in their ability to realise goals for improved teaching and learning is “the key cognitive variable regulating leader functioning in a dynamic environment” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 497). A sense of efficacy refers to believing in one’s own ability (i.e., self-efficacy) or the collective ability that includes one’s colleagues (i.e., collective efficacy) to achieve goals or accomplish tasks. However, it is a belief about ability, not actual ability. According to Bandura (1997, p. 118):

People make causal contributions to their own functioning through mechanisms of personal agency. Among the mechanisms of agency, none is more central or pervasive than peoples’ beliefs about their capabilities to exercise control over their own level of functioning and over events that affect their lives.

While self-efficacy is important, Louis et al. (2010) claim that system efficacy is the key to district-wide teaching and learning improvement. Hence, educational leaders who “see themselves as working collaboratively towards clear, common goals with district personnel, other principals, and teachers are more confident in their leadership” (Wahlstrom, Louis, Leithwood, & Anderson, 2010, p. 30). District Officials can enhance collective efficacy by providing opportunities for staff to develop expertise that is in line with the district’s goals and creates district organisational structures and settings to support enhanced work in teaching and learning. It is, therefore, crucial that educational leaders develop system efficacy.

## **2.4 District leadership: South African perspectives**

As discussed in Section 1.1, the state quality of basic education in SA leaves much to be desired. This has been the concern of the South African government since the dawn of democracy in 1994 (Bantwini, 2018). Spaul (2013, 2015) and Van der Berg et al. (2011) contend that the poor quality of education that continues to affect learners creates a vicious cycle of poverty that becomes intergenerational. What seems to be consistent in the recent policies of SA is the important role those district offices could play in realising the goal of improving teaching and learning across all schools (RSA, 2013; DBE, 2015; RSA, 2014). Furthermore, the literature suggests that while school-based leadership enhances teaching and learning, it falls short in increasing improvement on a large scale (Fullan, 2007; Honig, 2012; Harris, 2010). As a result, district leadership has emerged as a potential lever to improve teaching and learning.

While international literature on district leadership emerges, SA seems to be lagging. As a result, the role that DOs perform to support teaching and learning in schools is elusive and ambiguous. Narsee (2006) posited this as *the common and contested meaning of education districts in South Africa*, as reflected in the thesis title. Narsee (2006, p. 6) further observed:

The current South African discourse on education districts oscillates confusingly between districts as support centres for schools and districts as administrative and management arms of provincial departments of education. The primary purpose of districts, therefore, remains contentious: do districts exist primarily as a base for professional services to schools or are they established to ensure policy and administrative control.

One of the reasons for the neglect of the district leadership role that emerged in literature and created the vacuum in the development of knowledge is the policy changes landscape (Firestone, 1989; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Narsee, 2006). In the late 1990s, many school development initiatives focused on individual schools. This changed focus on School-Based Management (SBM) as the key to teaching and learning quality (Fleisch, 2006). Anderson (2003, p. 3) posited that lack of attention to the district role in improving teaching and learning became evident “in the heyday of the restructuring era, especially in the context of policies that emphasised decentralisation and SBM as the engine for change.” According to Fleisch (2006), three waves of education improvement initiatives give insight into understanding the role of districts in education are evident in SA. The first wave happened pre-1990 and referred to the small-scale educator-directed initiatives that failed to address system-wide weaknesses. The second wave of initiatives was initiated in the early 1990s with whole-school development programmes that focused on bottom-up development either through building collaborative organisational cultures at a school level or structured processes associated with school development planning. Fleisch (2006) and Christie et al. (2007) observed that these programmes failed to significantly impact teaching and learning and improvements in learner achievement.

A meta-analysis on the impact of SBM on improving teaching and learning outcomes found little evidence that it produces any improvements in the quality of education in the absence of both pressure and support from district and system levels of education (Anderson, 2003;

Marzano & Waters, 2009). Research on improving and high-performing school districts in the US depicted contemporary district improvement activities partly as a response to fragmentation and lack of coherence in the improvement efforts of quality education (Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Leithwood, 2010). Subsequently, the focus shifted towards the potential role of districts in sustaining school improvement. Hence, the third wave of education improvement initiatives, which focused on the system, commenced (Fleisch, 2006). Further clarifying the focus on district offices, Chinsamy (2013, p. 185) illustrates that by asserting that “the vacuum in the structures necessary to translate policy into practice – may be the primary reason for the failure of transformation in education.” He further states that implementation stands in the district office, which is between the central education department and schools.

Narsee (2006) observed that in SA, schools are likely to experience intervention from the district mainly as pressure more than as support. She elaborated further by suggesting that DOs spend their time mostly “on monitoring and policy compliance activities, rather than school development activities derived from the problems of schools themselves” (Narsee, 2006, p. 178). A study conducted by Mavuso (2013) on two districts in the Eastern Cape Province further corroborated this view. This research found that district-based officials understood and practised their role by focussing on administrative tasks, mainly monitoring policy implementation and resource provision when working with schools. The school management perceived DOs’ visits as focusing on compliance rather than support. Mavuso (2013) also found that schools perceived DOs as working incoherently and sometimes sending different messages to them. Bantwini and Moorosi (2017) study that examined the principals’ perspectives on the district role in supporting schools corroborated this finding. This study’s findings showed that principals were dissatisfied with the little support and low visibility of DOs in schools. These authors concluded that the DOs’ nature of support would determine principals and schools’ success (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). However, according to Taylor (2008, p. 27), district offices do not support the schools because they lack capacity, educational expert authority and are at a “dysfunctional state as the failing schools they purport to administer.”

It is widely documented that school-level leadership is the primary driving force that strengthens and sustains school improvement (Louis et al., 2010). However, for principals to lead effectively, DOs are supposed to provide support as mandated by the national department.

RSA (2013, p. 11) states that DOs are responsible for working collaboratively with principals by providing “management and professional support.” Nevertheless, existing evidence suggests that DOs are inadequately prepared to offer support to schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017; Mavuso, 2013; Naicker & Mestry, 2015). For example, local studies conducted by Bhengu et al. (2014) and Naicker et al. (2013) on principals’ instructional leadership in challenging contexts found that, among other barriers, a lack of or little support from education officials emerged as a hindrance to schools on curriculum delivery. Some principals in these studies indicated that the departmental officials could not provide professional support because they did not understand their schools’ curriculum needs. The DBE also acknowledged this anomaly in the Annual Performance Plan 2014–2015, that DOs do not provide support when they visit schools (DBE, 2014). Van der Berg et al. (2011) assert that much attention in SA has been on information sharing in a downward direction and that other methods of strengthening schools remain mostly unexplored. This assertion justifies that there is still much to be done in research to understand what DOs do to support schools. Hence, this study attempts to fill this gap in the literature.

Another study by Bantwini (2018) highlighted the perspective of the DOs on the factors that hinder quality basic education in one province in SA. This research found that DOs included teachers' low morale, schools’ lack of confidence in district offices, and the apparent neglect of the lower grades, which are supposed to lay the foundation of learning. Also, Naicker and Mestry (2015) conducted a qualitative study on a system-wide change strategy in school districts in one province of South Africa. This strategy sought to build leadership capacity for principals and DOs and revealed a lack of collaboration between principals and DOs as well as among principals. The study then recommended that PLCs and networks should “speed up system-wide change towards learner performance” (Naicker & Mestry, 2015, p. 1).

There seems to be a general agreement from the above literature that DOs’ lack of support for schools is detrimental to schools' success. This fact further justifies the need for this study to discover what DOs understand to be their role and what they believe to be their leadership practices that support schools. The hope is that this could give insights into why there is an anomaly of DOs not providing support to schools. However, while local literature reiterates the importance of the district office role in supporting schools, it is important to note that it criticises the DOs for failing to exercise the crucial role of supporting schools. The existing

local literature does not give insights into the DOs' functions and practices. Hence, this study attempts to address this void in the literature.

In this discussion, it has been emphasised that while districts are acknowledged as an essential level that offers support to schools, the education system in SA is yet to change. Honig (2012, p. 735) posits that district offices were “originally established and have historically operated to carry out a limited range of largely regulatory and basic business functions – not to support teaching and learning improvement.” Rorrer et al. (2008) reported that education improvement policies favoured school-based management, which excluded district offices and entrusted responsibility for learning outcomes to principals and school-level management. According to Honig (2013, p. 1), this resulted in a “mismatch” between the conventional roles of district offices inclined to compliance and the much-needed key role that focuses on teaching and learning. Despite the anomaly that seems to dominate, scholars have recently begun to illustrate practices of district offices that have focused their energies on supporting teaching and learning in schools. The next section details these practices. Even though little research has been conducted in SA on the role of the DOs to support teaching and learning, the literature highlights the need for DOs to develop and support principals, School Management Teams (SMTs) and teachers to enhance learning outcomes.

## **2.5 Some key district leadership practices that enhance teaching and learning**

In this section, the district instructional leadership role encompasses seven key leadership practices. These are as follows: establishing and communicating the district vision, providing instructional leadership, providing professional development and capacity for schools as well as DOs, providing differentiated and targeted support to schools, data-informed decision-making as a strategy for learning improvement, developing a collaborative culture and professional learning for teachers and leaders and fostering district and community partnerships. I discuss these practices below.

### **2.5.1 Establishing and communicating shared vision and mission**

Educational organisations have, in myriad ways, become complex organisations. Districts are even more multifaceted because they involve many more people and schools, which at times function as autonomous units within the districts (Honig, 2012). Therefore, it calls for all



involved in teaching and learning to build a shared understanding of a purposeful direction and a set of core goals to support the direction, which is a challenge that educational leadership must tackle to be successful (Fullan, 2010). Sharing similar sentiments, DuFour and Marzano (2011, p. 29) state that “the willingness to articulate fundamental goals, the strategies for achieving those goals and the indicators that will be used to monitor progress towards the goals are vital to effective district leadership.” Furthermore, Leithwood and Riehl (2003, p. 3) suggest that “effective leaders help their schools develop or endorse visions that embody the best about teaching and learning [by inspiring] others to reach for ambitious goals.” Fullan (2010) further elaborates by identifying leadership components for DOs to pursue the moral purpose of education with learning improvement. These include building relationships among DOs, with schools as well as communities.

For realising this vision of schooling, it is important that educational systems understand the moral purpose of education. In his book, *The Moral Imperative of School Leadership*, Fullan (2003) argues that the most powerful lever for continuous large-scale school reform and for changing the context of the present schooling experience is the moral purpose of public schools. This theorist pronounces:

[The] moral purpose of the highest order is having a system where all students learn, the gap between high and low performance becomes greatly reduced, and what people learn enables them to be successful citizens and workers in a morally based knowledge society (Fullan, 2003, p. 28).

Connecting school leadership to student learning as part of a moral imperative is the need for bridging the learner achievement gap while sustaining improvement across all schools (Leithwood, 2010). This seems critical in the effort to transform education systems to prepare learners better to sustain themselves and integrate well into the industrial society. According to Childress et al. (2007), a district's mission and vision can infuse into the system through theory or action by articulating statements of beliefs that guide the district in selecting strategies intended to have a considerable impact on the instructional core. District Officials also need to spend considerable time and energy on addressing the vision and mission issues with the aim of redefining district and school cultures (Fullan, 2007; Louis et al., 2010; Leithwood & Louis, 2012). Additionally, Louis et al. (2010) found that districts should be very clear and repetitive

when communicating their agenda for student learning. They further concluded that district leaders should be visible and articulate and cooperatively work together in the district so that all convey the message collectively. Consistent with the work of Fullan (2007, see also Bennis & Nanus, 1997), DuFour and Marzano (2011) recognise the importance of a guiding vision and strong relationships. They assert that “the ability to articulate a realistic, credible, and attractive vision of the future that connects to the hopes and dreams of others is a defining skill of an effective leader” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 202). The best leaders link these two concepts, the vision and the importance of the work; they help to build a sense of empowerment and commitment. They advise district leaders that they need to link the vision of the district:

To the hopes and dreams of those [they] serve. Work with a guiding coalition to develop the specific actionable steps [DOs] will take to move towards the vision. Then constantly remind...staff of the importance of their work by linking it to a higher purpose (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 203).

Essential to the leaders in realising the district's mission and vision is the idea of “helping staff to develop shared understandings about the school and its activities as well as goals that undergird a sense of purpose or vision” (Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008, p. 507). Leithwood (2010) concluded in his comprehensive review of research that high-performing districts develop a shared vision that focuses on closing performance gaps and ensuring that all students perform to high standards. Furthermore, Marzano and Waters (2009, p. 7) found that high-performing districts typically did not adopt a single frame for teaching and learning. However, they adopted “a broad but common framework for classroom instructional design and planning that guarantees the consistent use of research-based instructional strategies in each school.” In addition, five districts studied by Togneri and Anderson (2003, p. 15) defined their vision for teaching as a practice that involved reflection, wherein teachers

“actively engage students in rigorous content, assess the impact of instructional methods, reflect on their practice, work with colleagues to research and share effective practice, and make appropriate adjustments to help students learn effectively”.

In these districts, the strategic plan encompassed comprehensive goals and strategies. What emerged as prominent in this study was the extent to which these districts used their visions and goals to guide instructional improvement. These goals were “increasing achievement for

all students, improving instruction, creating a safe and supportive environment for students and involving parents and the community” (Togneri & Anderson, 2003, p. 12).

Moreover, from the literature, it appears that there is a need for a district’s vision and beliefs for learner achievement to be a shared endeavour by all staff in the district, including schools (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Johnson & Chrispeels, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Levin et al., 2012). Hence, communication is key to actualising the vision and goals into everyday practice (Fullan, 2007). Communication serves as the means for leaders to improve their work with various schools to instil the vision. While traditional communication tools are still seen as important, the emergence of social media calls for educational leadership to shift their thinking to incorporating social media technologies in their day-to-day work. This is because social media tools allow for greater interactions between educational leaders and their stakeholders and can significantly influence school personnel and the district. Hence leaders should take social media use as an expectation, not just an option (Cox, 2012). Using these tools, Protheroe (2008, p. 38) posits that district leaders need to communicate “a clear and unwavering message [that] low expectations for any group of students was unacceptable.” DuFour and Marzano (2011, p. 198) caution against letting vision, planning, and conversation be a substitute for “purposeful action,” hence district leaders need to “engage others in clarifying the very specific steps that must be taken.” These authors discuss the need to be explicit and contend that DOs habitually “rely on generalities of ‘we want all schools to focus on teaching and learning rather than clarifying the actionable steps they expect schools to take” (DuFour & Marzano, p. 33).

Furthermore, Cawelti and Protheroe (2003) contend that it is not enough only to create compelling images about the district’s future. However, district offices should develop programmes, plans and teaching strategies that lead to improved learner achievement. Louis et al. (2010) argue that this leads to a gap between visioning and bringing the vision to being. The section below discusses another leadership practice of DOs: district instructional focused leadership practice.

### **2.5.2 Focus on instructional leadership**

Focused district office instructional leadership is the driving force for improved teaching and learning as it enables the alignment of instructional district-wide consistently in every school (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008). Over the last decade, researchers have helped

us understand that a distinct type of leadership is evident in high-performing schools and districts. This can be characterised as leadership for learning, instructionally focused leadership or leadership for school improvement (Knapp et al., 2014). Providing this kind of leadership means focusing on the moral imperative of education with teaching and learning. Education leaders across all system levels need to enable teaching and learning to be successful. However, over the last two decades, most studies have focused on principals' leadership as having a positive and significant effect on learner performance (Bhengu et al., 2014; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Naicker et al., 2013). There is little research on the role of DOs' instructional leadership.

Rorrer et al. (2008) conducted a narrative synthesis analysis of the empirical research over two decades on leadership with the primary focus on districts. They concluded that there are two essential features to the instructional leadership role in sustaining teaching and learning improvement, which are generating the will to transformation and capacity building. Rorrer et al. (2008) concluded that district instructional leadership involves coordinating and aligning the work of others through communication, planning, and collaboration, monitoring goals for learner performance and improving instructional practices. These also include increasing data accessibility, availability and accountability; and acquiring and targeting support for instruction. To lead and manage teaching and learning in schools, district leaders need to establish clear expectations across all improvement imperatives by increasing coherence, coordination and synergy in the effectiveness of district improvement efforts over time (Rorrer et al., 2008).

### **2.5.3 Providing professional development and capacity**

As discussed in Section 1.1, almost 25 years after democracy, quality education for all children in SA remains elusive and still characterised by inequalities that could be explained by racial and socioeconomic status (Spaull, 2013; RSA, 2014). King-McKenzie, Delacruz, Bantwini, and Bogan (2013, p. 30) note that teachers in SA are subject to frequent curriculum changes; for example, four curriculum policies have been introduced in 15 years. These policies are the Curriculum 2005 (C2005), the Revised National Curriculum Statements (RNCS), the National Curriculum Statements (NCS) and CAPS. Teachers who are supposed to implement such curriculum changes require professional development. Furthermore, as curriculum managers, principals need capacity development to support teachers and SMTs. However, teachers and

school principals do not adequately receive professional development support. Van der Berg, Spaull, Wills, Gustafsson, and Kotzé (2016, p. 26) echoed this concern when they suggested that “support is far from adequate in most public educational systems.” This assertion confirms that further research concerning the DOs and their roles is needed as they are the schools’ immediate level of support. If we do not know how DOs organise themselves to support schools, we may not understand why schools feel under-supported by the district office. Moreover, Spaull (2013, p. 9) contends that “while the roots of this system may be traced back to the apartheid era, it is inexcusable that most Black children still receive an education that condemns them to be the underclass of South African society.” National Education Evaluation and Development Unit [NEEDU] also report that the majority of South African learners do not receive a quality education, which is aggravated by the following:

The quality of schooling is inequitably distributed, with the poorer 80% of the population generally receiving schooling of significantly inferior quality to that enjoyed by the most affluent 20%. The majority of South African children – from homes of the working class or unemployed and frequently child-headed households – attend township or rural schools (NEEDU, 2015, p. 2).

While it appears that DOs provide instructional leadership by generating will, as revealed in Section 2.5.2, DOs need to combine this with capacity building (Rorrer et al., 2008). District Officials also need to understand the need for building capacity for teachers as well as school management and work towards linking and aligning their functions to improve teaching and learning in schools (Fullan, 2001). In that way, DOs could model the behaviour to school management and teachers. Leithwood and Louis (2012) state that it is vital for teachers and principals to improve the quality of teaching and learning as well as the districts develop the conditions to provide such capacity. Also, Fullan (2010, p. 2) asserts, “the power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things”. Firstly, knowledge of effective practices is widely available and accessible daily. Secondly, working together generates commitment. Consequently, effective development improves significantly.

Furthermore, professional development practices can have a positive impact when they are job-embedded, ongoing and sustained and are most effective when carried out in a community of practice (Louis et al., 2010). Therefore, districts should be characterised by a considerable

investment in capacity building among leaders and teachers and ensure that these professional development activities align with the significant goal of improving student achievement. Bantwini (2012, p. 517) explains how this affects teacher quality through professional development in primary schools in one province in SA:

Teachers had negative perceptions that led to the belief that they were not receiving the support and tools they needed for professional development from their district. The impact of their perceptions was evident in the slow or non-implementation of the district's newly launched curriculum reforms [...]. Failure to address teachers' perceptions is likely to result in teachers not benefiting from their professional development programs.

In investing in capacity building for school personnel, teachers will likely need help “building their repertoire of instructional strategies as they work to ensure all students make needed progress towards instructional goals” (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007, p. 49). However, Levin et al. (2012) suggested that it is also vital for district offices to build their capacity to support school improvement. The preceding discussion seems to point to the dire need for continuing investment in collective capacity building to make a positive and long-term change. Fullan (2010, p. 72) suggests:

The power of collective capacity is that it enables ordinary people to accomplish extraordinary things – for two reasons. One is that knowledge about effective practice becomes more widely available and accessible on a daily basis. The second reason is more powerful still – working together generates commitment. Moral purpose, when it stares you in the face through students and your peers working together to make lives and society better, is palpable, indeed virtually irresistible.

Sharrat and Fullan (2009) conceptualise capacity building as “a highly complex, dynamic, knowledge-building process, intended to lead to increased student achievement in every school. [Hence], consideration must be given to the approaches that would result in systemic capacity building” (Sharrat & Fullan, 2009, p. 8). Honig (2012) stated that it is critical for DOs to offer professional development for principals so that they become effective leaders who positively affect learner performance. This author further notes that enabling principals to be instructional leaders must stem from the beliefs of all DOs, not only executive leaders.

However, Corcoran et al. (2013) noted that district professional development programmes usually do not consider the content base of teachers. However, they overemphasise procedures as opposed to enhancing learning for both teachers and learners (Corcoran et al., 2013).

Moreover, Bottoms and Schmidt-Davis (2010) suggested that district leaders need to offer a balanced set of professional learning experiences by prioritising the development of the capacity of all teaching staff to generate interesting and appealing involvement for learners. Secondly, they need to develop professional learning communities where district and school leaders share learning experiences as well as induction programmes and mentoring for new principals and teachers. Copland and Blum (2007, p. 44) stated that "as district leaders develop their own capacity, they become more adept at refining long-term goals and problem-solving along the way." However, they must have a professional learning plan that continuously increases the capacity of district staff to support principals and schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010).

#### **2.5.4 District office providing differentiated support to schools**

District officials need to provide directed and phased support that focuses on learner performance improvement, and these actions across the district will ensure the sustainability of progress. As Anderson and Louis (2012, p. 202) recommended:

Districts need to take steps to monitor and sustain high-level student performance wherever it is found and to set ambitious goals for student learning that goes beyond proficiency levels on standardised tests. Focusing improvements solely on low performing schools and students is not a productive strategy for continual improvement in a district.

However, according to Christie et al. (2007), well-performing schools do not receive support from the districts in SA. Moreover, the study by Anderson et al. (2012, p. 428) reported that differentiated support, as opposed to a "one-size-fits-all" approach envisaged in response to "the pressure and expectations of accountability systems." Their findings revealed differences among the four districts they studied in how district leaders worked to create integration and coherence across all schools. Their findings also affirmed that commitment by district leaders to strategies is required that engage them in organisational learning focusing on a thorough

understanding of the challenges and conditions of each school. They perceived that as a key to “differentiating district support for improvement in a more adaptive as opposed to the bureaucratic way” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 427). Louis et al. (2010, p. 216) also observed the need to differentiate the support provided to schools according to the individual school’s “priorities, strengths, weaknesses and circumstances.” This is because “one-size fits all district’s interventions are typical of much less value to schools than many districts believe” (Louis et al., 2010, p. 216). Coordination and coherence across different districts’ subunits within the districts are also essential.

Anderson et al. (2012) concluded that there are five forms of district intervention for differentiation. The first approach is a phased intervention; this is where district leaders embark on a district-wide initiative in a few schools or grade levels with the purpose of scaling up the initiative over time (Anderson et al., 2012). The second approach is targeted intervention, whereby differentiated support mainly targets specific schools that do not meet the standards-based performance. The third approach is responsive differentiation, in which districts respond to individual schools according to their school plans and concerns. In this way, districts do not just apply predetermined intervention plans as in the targeted intervention approach. Datnow, Lasky, Springfield & Teddlie (2006, p. 47) support this intervention as they suggest that:

Creating opportunities for bilateral negotiation between district administrators and school principals [is] particularly effective way to meet school’s unique set of needs while also creating a way for officials in the central office to stay more informed about reform conditions, challenges, and successes in each school.

The fourth approach is categorical differentiation, which is a top-down approach. In this approach, support is based on “defined differences between schools based on types of students served, programs offered...and differential allocation of resources on that basis” (Anderson et al., 2012, p. 406). The last approach is micro-political differentiation. In this approach, DOs often have competing visions of improvement (Spillane cited in Anderson et al., 2012). They also develop relationships with individual schools; consequently, different schools get diverse types of support, which are more dependent on personal relationships with the district personnel. Anderson et al. (2012) assert that these approaches to differentiated support are not mutually exclusive.



### **2.5.5 Data-informed decision-making as a strategy for learning improvement**

The use of data for educational decision-making has never been more prevalent (Datnow, Park, & Kennedy-Lewis, 2013; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). Lai and Schildkamp (2013, p. 10) define data as “information that is systematically collected and organised to represent some aspect of schools” (Lai & Schildkamp, 2013, p. 10). Levin et al. (2012) conceptualise DDDM as a key strategy for supporting teaching and learning improvement. According to Marsh, Kerr, Ikemoto et al. (2005, p. 1), DDDM refers to “teachers, principals, and administrators systematically collecting and analysing various types of data ... to guide a range of decisions to help improve the success of students and schools”. This includes qualitative as well as quantitative data that teachers and school leaders need for decision-making (Lai & Schildkamp, 2013; Wayman, Cho, Jimerson, & Spikes, 2012).

Evidence from research on improving school districts shows that data-informed decision-making emphasising data concerning student progress and outcomes is a crucial and effective district-level leadership strategy (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Togneri & Anderson, 2003). Datnow, Park, and Wohlstetter’s (2007) study of districts confirms the positive relationship between student achievement and the engagement of DOs in Data-Driven Decision-Making (DDDM). It also highlights the district leadership key role in establishing a culture and support system for performance-driven inquiry and decision-making at the school and local system levels. Louis et al. (2010) suggest that student assessment data should be available as a requirement for district accountability. This enhances DOs’ planning for learning for schools and learners to meet performance targets. Wohlstetter, Datnow, and Park (2008) found that district leadership practices that develop DDDM include:

1. Establishment of meaningful goals for improvement in learner performance aligned with system-wide curriculum and accountability requirements.
2. Create explicit norms and expectations for data use for decision-making.
3. Develop structures to enable the interchange of information between the district office and schools about performance and plans for improvement.
4. Invest in developing the capacity of schools and district personnel to use data.

Honig and Coburn (2008) analysed a district’s instructional decisions over three years and found that DOs were inclined to interpret problems in ways that were consistent with their

beliefs about data use. Similarly, Honig et al. (2010) found that DOs sometimes used data to garner political support from different stakeholders. Their study revealed that the critical dimension of data-driven decision-making is the “use of evidence throughout the central office to support continual improvement of work practices and relationships with schools.” Data-based decision-making is not only about the need to use data, but leaders should also construct meanings from the data and act upon these. Data on its own does not change anything if it is not analysed and interpreted to inform learning improvements (Farley-Ripple, 2012). Daly (2012, p. 2) argues, “the ultimate success of data use for educational improvement may depend on how states and local education agencies build capacity.” As a result, districts need to provide the capacity and support to assist schools in using data to inform decision-making (Marsh et al., 2005). Also, it could also be undertaken by districts investment in management information systems and professional development to develop proficiency and capacity at the schools (Datnow et al., 2007).

Anderson, Leithwood, and Louis (2012) believe that when districts prioritise data and if they inform their leadership practices through data use, they have a positive impact on principals and teachers. This is also because district leaders set expectations and model data to use within their districts. Data use also influences decision-making that provides direct and relevant support to schools. Consequently, there is a positive effect on student achievement in schools (Anderson et al., 2012). Moreover, Chinsamy (2013) asserts that the use of learner performance data has proven to be relevant to school districts in supporting and monitoring learner performance improvement. However, he emphasises the importance of correct and up-to-date data to provide relevant support as well as planning under limited resources.

From the above discussion, DDDM at all education system levels is important, and literature suggests that data use should be a norm. As a result, the DOs need to promote a culture of use through structures and processes, which widely promote dialogue and learning through practices within the district and educational system (Datnow et al., 2007; Fullan, 2007). Hence, Hargreaves and Braun (2013) recommend that data-driven or evidence-informed improvement should enable educational leaders to monitor the progress of all learners and schools in real-time. Consequently, make timely interventions so that no child will indeed be left behind” (Hargreaves & Braun, 2013, p. 4). It is also important for DOs to gather and analyse student

engagement data to use as a tool for improving student involvement in their learning (Levin et al., 2012).

The literature agrees that leadership is a central component in DDDM that occurs within a school (Hamilton et al., 2009; Van der Berg et al., 2011). According to (Hamilton et al., 2009; see also Wayman et al., 2012), the key leadership functions are providing a vision for data use and defining the purpose and expectations for its use. While principals set the tone for their schools, district heads set it for their districts and the more explicit the vision, the more precise the expectations are for the staff at the school or district levels. Consequently, the culture of accepting and expecting the use of data to inform practice and improve learner performance develops (Means, Padilla, & Gallagher, 2010). Furthermore, principals and district leaders should make time for collaboration and resources to foster data culture and model data use (Means et al., 2010).

Hamilton et al. (2009, p. 46) define data culture as:

A learning environment within a school or district that includes attitudes, values, goals, norms of behaviour, and practices, accompanied by an explicit vision for data use by leadership, that characterise a group's appreciation for the importance and power that data can bring to the decision-making process. It also includes the recognition that data collection is a necessary part of an educator's responsibilities and that the use of data to influence and inform practice is an essential tool that will be used frequently.

Developing a data culture should involve strengthening collaboration, developing a data team and providing timely access to data. Furthermore, continuous improvement must be emphasised (Datnow et al., 2013). What also emerges in this discussion is the significant element of the DOs' effective use of data to inform practices that would support schools. However, Levin et al. (2012) contend that while data is available in the districts and schools, the focus of district offices usually remains on ranking and grading schools while ignoring areas that might improve learning outcomes. This scholar suggests that district leaders should use data to assess how well they are progressing and to compare the performance of their schools with the set goals and targets. Levin et al. (2012) highlight the importance of using results-orientated strategies as an ongoing pursuit for improvement and accountability across

schools and within the district. What Levin et al. (2012, p. 22) also emphasise as essential is the use of data to inform district offices about how they are performing but, most importantly, how they “can help more students to be more successful.”

#### **2.5.6 Collaborative culture and professional learning across the district and schools**

As discussed in Section 2.5.3, providing professional development for teachers, SMTs and principals are necessary for enhancing teaching and learning. According to the Integrated Strategic Planning Framework for Teacher Education in SA, one important way to develop school-based personnel should be through professional learning communities [PLCs] (DBE, 2011). The policy framework aimed to address the limitations of conventional capacity development programmes that tend to be once-off training workshops and top-down. These once-off development programmes would rarely have follow-ups and usually are not coordinated. So, there is a need for district-level officials to facilitate PLCs to provide continued professional support (DBE, 2011). DuFour and Marzano (2011) state that for district leadership that supports PLCs, DOs need to place educators in collaborative teams and give them time to collaborate. Following a comprehensive review of the educational literature, Stoll et al. (2006, p. 223) concluded that:

A professional learning community suggests a group of people sharing critically interrogating their practice in an ongoing, reflective, collaborative, inclusive, learning oriented, growth promoting way and operating as a collective enterprise.

For the professional community to establish educational leaders across all levels, they need to “accept responsibility for providing educators with the clarity, structures, resources, and ongoing support essential to their success” (DuFour & Marzano, 2011, p. 70). District officials also need to provide support structures such as clarity and goals to teams and monitor the work of teams (DuFour & Marzano, 2011). Another study of three educational districts in the US examined the district managements’ role in developing PLCs, success, and their sustainability (Horton and Martin, 2013). Four themes emerged from this study: Developing a sense of collective efficacy and responsibility for student learning, fostering collaborative and distributive leadership, emphasising collaborative teams instead of isolation and lastly, using data to drive improved instruction. There is also an undertaking in the literature that DOs’

efforts should focus on teacher's professional networks and principal PLCs to ensure that principals' instructional leadership is strengthened to enhance the quality of teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015).

Louis et al.'s (2010) findings suggest that the process of PLCs helped change school districts by creating high-performing collaborative teams, developing a district-wide sense of efficacy, and emphasising the use of data to improve education. However, these findings suggest that this is feasible if the district head is engaged throughout the change and is largely involved in developing the district vision and goal-setting activities. Moreover, DuFour and Fullan (2013) assert that viewing PLCs district-wide, instead of as individual schools, leads to system change where schools learn from each other, leading to lateral capacity building, which is vital for system reform (Fullan, 2009). While the research in district office leadership is only emerging, the literature suggests that principals' PLCs, sometimes called principal networks, could be one of the strategies used for training principals on how to engage in instructional leadership (City et al., 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Hubbard et al., 2006). For example, using time logs and interviews, Barnes Camburn, Sanders & Sebastian (2010) found that principals' collaboration meetings improved their engagement in instructional leadership. While this is the case, facilitation by DOs in these meetings seems to play a particularly significant role in supporting principals' learning (City et al., 2009). Barnes et al. (2010) found that when facilitators created opportunities for principals to "actively engage with peers" in meetings, many demonstrated a richer understanding of sometimes elusive instructional leadership concepts and developed strategies for incorporating these concepts into their daily practices (Barnes et al., 2010, p. 255).

### **2.5.7 Fostering district and community partnerships**

Another district leadership function to support teaching and learning is fostering partnerships with communities. Engagement with the community is vital because schools are microcosms of society. Literature suggests that when district leaders support partnerships with family, businesses, and community partnerships, student achievement can improve (Aidman & Baray, 2016; Austin, 2010; Bennett & Thompson, 2011; Wohlstetter, Malloy, Hentschke, & Smith, 2004). Teachers, SMTs, DOs, all system-level leaders, and the community must work together to achieve performance goals. Waters and Marzano (2006) posit that "district leaders must

include all relevant stakeholders including central office staff, building-level administrators and board members in establishing goals for their districts” (p. 3). Furthermore, Cox-Peterson (2011, p. 16) contends that “partnerships are necessary to obtain high educational achievement for all students – regardless of gender, socioeconomic status, family make-up, or ethnic group.” He supports this assertion by citing Berliner and Biddle (1995, p. 16), who propose that “schools could potentially overcome the effects of poverty and inequities among students by developing connections to the community, their teachers, and their peers.” In pursuing this vision, districts should collaborate with all stakeholders. (Foley & Sigler, 2009). According to Honig et al. (2010; see also Fullan, 2010; Levin et al., 2012), the importance of partnerships and the interface between district office staff and school principals are crucial for district-wide improvement. This is because “high levels of student achievement are possible when schools and the district act as coordinated units of change” (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson, & Daly, 2008, p. 730).

Not only principals’/DOs’ partnerships are important; building relationships with parents and the community are also vital. Also, DOs play a pivotal role in fostering political support for their vision of improved student achievement to be successful (Levin et al., 2012). In Honig et al. (2010) study, external partnerships aim to improve the district’s capacity to support student learning. Moreover, partnerships involving a wide range of community agencies, parent and community groups help district offices leverage additional resources into the district-wide endeavours (Foley & Sigler, 2009). In Skrla, Scheurich, and Johnson’s (2000) study, external partners supported the districts’ visions for enhancing equity in all schools.

Furthermore, harnessing the power of communities could improve district performance. However, according to literature, educational leadership sometimes undervalue communities’ contributions to improve schools. Black and English (1986) assert that the key for educational leaders in using community power is to make those who have such power know that their contributions are valued and important. However, they also note that leaders need to understand that communities have different interests and conflicts, and as a result, leaders should be able to juggle between these interests.

Another critical partnership recognised as vital between districts and their external communities concerns local teacher unions. In his book, *How to Change 5000 Schools*, Levin

(2008) asserts that constant effort is required to engage teacher organisations in conversation about teachers' needs and the public education system as a whole. While this does happen, there is widespread anecdotal evidence that teacher unions contribute to underperformance in South African schools by adopting a negative approach to initiatives intended to promote improvement. Msila's (2014) study of ten urban schools in one province in SA suggests that strong union affiliations lead to the management and leadership of the schools becoming powerless with additional adverse effects on teaching and learning. As for this study, it was important that I determine how district officials interacted with unions in their daily operation of supporting schools. District leaders need to move away from inactive engagement with stakeholders to building creative relationships but not losing sight of the vision and goals of education to ensure transparency in policy and decision-making (Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Levin et al., 2012). The following section discusses some district leadership challenges faced by DOs when attempting to support teaching and learning in schools. More literature indicates that when educational leaders foster partnerships with communities, they acquire additional support and resources from these partnerships (Honig & Copland, 2014; Myende, 2018).

## **2.6 Some district officials' leadership challenges**

In these studies, district offices seem to be crucial in addressing the challenges of teaching and learning in schools; DOs still face a multiplicity of challenges. For example, competition and lack of coordination within district office units can impede their support for teaching and learning improvement (Honig & Rainey, 2015). Moreover, misalignment between the district and provincial offices is another challenge faced by DOs. Studies conducted in SA found that districts are frequently confronted with conflicting demands; as a result, district participation in provincial head office planning and decision-making is limited (Twalo, 2017; Narsee, 2006; Roberts, 2001). These studies revealed a lack of system coordination from provincial directives to districts because different provincial directorates make several and conflicting demands at any one time, sometimes late after districts had their planning (Roberts, 2001; Narsee, 2006). Also, district offices criticise late communication from the national and provincial departments. As a result, districts self-initiated strategic plans based on the needs of schools frequently go unimplemented and are always secondary to the demands of the provincial head office, causing unnecessary stress on schools and the district-school relationship (Narsee, 2006).

Another challenge that DOs face is the limitations of available data for targeting resources for improvement, which is attributed to the fact that they lack reliable access to data that might better inform them about the actual quality of teaching in each school (Rainey & Honig, 2015). The study conducted by Rainey and Honig (2015) found mismatches between teacher quality and professional development opportunities to be common in many school districts. The DOs who supervise principals provided them with minimal intensive support that could help them lead to instructional improvement (Honig, 2013; Honig & Rainey, 2015). Too many district intervention initiatives could be detrimental in the pursuit of supporting teaching and learning. This confirms Corcoran et al., (2013) research, which found that “the districts themselves were not focused. They were supporting multiple initiatives simultaneously, and they expected the professional development infrastructure to support all of them” (Corcoran’s et al., 2013) p. 83). DuFour and Marzano (2011, p. 40) concur by contending that:

The biggest barriers to improving teaching and learning in schools are the unmanageable number of initiatives pursued by the [district] office and total lack of coherence among those initiatives ...the adage ‘What gets monitored gets done’ has been misinterpreted as ‘The more programs we monitor, the more that will get done.’

According to DuFour and Marzano (2011, p. 40), this leads to “initiative fatigue, when there is a multitude of fragmented, disconnected, short-term projects that sap [teachers] energy.” The cost-effectiveness and sustainability of too many initiatives became a huge challenge. Fullan (2010) suggests that DOs need to identify key priorities and pursue them persistently. He contends that too many initiatives presented as disconnected tasks do not achieve the intended endeavours of enhancing learning outcomes.

District leadership has continued to be a topical issue in policy debates. As discussed in Chapter 1, the South African government recently developed a policy on the roles and responsibilities of education DOs (RSA, 2013). This policy acknowledges that district offices still lack exclusive authority on the oversight of schools despite their crucial role in delivering high-quality education. While this policy highlights this ambitious role, it seems not precise on guidelines concerning leadership practices that DOs could enact to support teaching and learning. Moreover, there seems to be a misalignment between the directives of this policy and



the structure of the districts. For example, a policy study conducted by the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) raised some pertinent issues regarding implementation challenges to the district policy in Gauteng Province (Twalo, 2017). This study found that this policy created challenges for the DOs who felt that while this policy focused on their role as supporting schools, they were dissatisfied with the conceptualisation of “support” as it seemed to be indefinite. They cited that they did not have jurisdiction on instigating disciplinary measures on the management of poor-performing principals and teachers.

Another challenge raised by DOs was the lack of resources, for example, working without a budget. District Officials also highlighted structural misalignment between district offices and provincial and national departments as a considerable challenge. They raised concerns that while they had strategic and operational plans to support schools, the provincial department would intermittently bring their plans that could not be integrated well with district plans. The absence of integrated planning results in uncoordinated planning, which could then hinder their attempts to support schools as national and provincial plans could take precedence. Another structural challenge was a misalignment between many directorates in the provincial and district offices, resulting in DOs inundated with clashing plans and directives from these directorates (Twalo, 2017). These policy implementation challenges call for further research on the experiences of DOs so to better understand how to address these.

## **2.7 Conclusion**

At the beginning of the review, I outlined empirical and conceptual issues regarding educational leadership. While in the discussion, it emerged that there are multiple ways in which educational leadership is conceptualised, focusing on leadership practices aimed at the moral purpose of education, teaching, and learning should constitute the core of the tasks for leaders. The previous literature review provided insights on the DOs’ role in supporting teaching and learning, implying important directions for future research. Firstly, the literature points to the critical leadership role DOs could play in supporting teaching and learning for success. However, this review points to the attention on school-level leadership as the key while ignoring the crucial role DOs play in enhancing teaching and learning. This has created a void in understanding the crucial potential role of DOs in enhancing teaching and learning in

schools. As Honig (2012) suggests, there is minimal understanding of how DOs can potentially facilitate their work in a way that enhances teaching and learning.

The review then outlined a conceptual and empirical discussion on the core practices undertaken by DOs to support teaching and learning. Establishing and communicating the district vision, including setting goals and targets, came out vital in realising improvement in teaching and learning. Communicating the vision and goals within the district offices and to schools emerged as crucial in the literature. The same scholars raised the issues of providing instructionally focused leadership, providing professional development and capacity for schools as well as DOs, and providing differentiated and targeted support to schools. Also, DDDM as a strategy for learning improvement, developing a collaborative culture and professional learning for teachers and leaders, and fostering district and community partnerships emerged as important leadership practices to enhance teaching and learning.

Furthermore, the literature reviewed in this chapter indicated that district offices are a valuable resource in supporting teaching and learning for quality education. However, South African studies revealed that schools experience little or no support from education DOs and that a disparity exists between schools and district offices, wherein schools feel under-supported. There is not enough information to understand why and in this environment, this study sought to explore how DOs understood and practised their leadership role of supporting teaching and learning. The next chapter discusses the theoretical framework for this study.

## CHAPTER 3

### POSITIONING THE STUDY IN THE THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

*While it is true that schools are unique and must operate in such a way as to address their unique needs, it is also true that each school must operate as a functional component of the larger system. It is a larger system - the district - that establishes the common work of schools within the district, and it is that common work that becomes the 'glue' holding the district together (Marzano & Waters, 2009, p. 90).*

#### 3.1 Introduction

This quotation illustrates the vital task of DOs in supporting schools. It also highlights the complexities through which district leaders need to navigate as they carry out their essential undertaking of supporting teaching and learning. As discussed in Chapter 2, district leaders operate in complex situations that call for a theoretical framework to explain these challenges. This chapter discusses the theoretical framework that guided me in exploring, interpreting and explaining the district leadership role and practices in this study. In developing this chapter, I begin by qualifying the choice of the theoretical framework instead of a conceptual framework for the research. This is necessary considering the ambiguities and inconsistencies that exist in the conceptualisation of these two terms (Anfara & Mertz, 2006; Ravitch & Riggan, 2012). I then discuss the outline of this study which comprises three theories, that is, Open Social Systems Theory (OSS), Public Educational Leadership Project (PELP) Coherence Framework and Adaptive Leadership Theory (ALT).

The theory has a crucial role in framing and conducting a research study, but there are still some ambiguities and inconsistencies concerning the use of a theoretical framework in qualitative research. Anfara and Mertz (2006, p. xvii) posit that “a useful theory is one that tells an enlightening story about some phenomenon. It is a story that gives you new insights and broadens your understanding of the phenomenon”. While reading, I came across these two terms: theoretical framework and conceptual framework. Different authors seem to favour one or the other; for example, Merriam (2009) utilises “theoretical framework,” while Maxwell (2005) and Marshall and Rossman (2011) consistently refer to “conceptual framework.” Other scholars, for example, Maxwell (2005, p. 33, see also Ravitch & Riggan, 2012) see theory as

the subset of a conceptual framework by stating that “...the conceptual framework of your study [is] the system of concepts, assumptions, expectations, beliefs, and theories that supports and informs your research...”. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) contend that conceptual frameworks are composed of three elements; “personal interests, topical research, and theoretical frameworks” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 10). However, some advocate for the interchangeable use of the two terms and refer to theoretical (or conceptual) frameworks or “a theoretical model/conceptual framework” (Schulz cited in Merriam & Tisdell, 2016, p. 86).

There is an inconsistency concerning the use of these terms. Also, there is disagreement concerning the use of theory in qualitative studies. In an attempt to clarify this, Merriam (1998, p. 45) argued that “many believe mistakenly that theory has no place in the qualitative study. It would be difficult to imagine a study without a theoretical or conceptual framework”. Likewise, Anfara and Mertz (2014) contend that it would be impossible to know how to conduct the research without some explicit or implicit theoretical framework to guide the researcher.

Furthermore, Silverman (2005, p. 107) posits that “without theory, research is impossibly narrow. Without research, a theory is mere armchair contemplation”. Referring to research in general, Maxwell (2005, p. 46) suggests that “every research design needs *some* [emphasis original] theory of the phenomena you are studying...to guide the other design decisions that you are going to make”. However, Maxwell (2005) further argues that while theory can never be avoided in research, imposing theory from the beginning of the study should prevent the researcher from “seeing events and relationships that do not fit the theory” (Maxwell, 2005, p. 46).

While these inconsistencies in the conceptualisation of theory exist, the authors above see theory as important in developing research. Anfara and Mertz (2014) conclude that the adoption of a theoretical framework guides the researchers’ thinking about the phenomenon under investigation. While I acknowledge that the term theoretical framework does not have a consistent definition, I adopted the definition of a theoretical framework by Anfara and Mertz (2014) as “any empirical and quasi-empirical theory of social...processes...that can be applied to the understanding of the phenomena” (Anfara & Mertz, 2014, p. 15). The phenomenon I

attempted to understand was the perspective of DOs about their beliefs regarding their role in supporting teaching and learning as well as their leadership practices.

As discussed in Chapter 1, the district is a complex system comprising nested layers, where the roles of the officials are “variably coupled”. Therefore, this calls for a theory that will address their “complexity and adaptability” and the “interdependence of the roles they enact” (Rorrer et al., 2008, p. 336). Maxwell (2005) asserts that a theoretical framework for research studies is most useful when it integrates theories that capture different aspects of the phenomenon of the study. For this reason, I incorporated three theories into my study, OSS, PELP Framework and ALT. As discussed below, these three theories helped me in data analysis.

### **3.2 Education districts as open social systems**

In viewing districts as organisations, recognising their complexity is essential due to the interacting elements required to adapt to their environment (Scott, 2003). For this reason, I postulate districts as open social systems (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Scott, 2003; Senge, Scharmer, Jaworski, & Flowers., 2004). Open Social Systems theory suggests that an organisation is a set of interrelated elements, and change in one element affects other elements (Senge et al., 2012). Hence, the nature of each component must be well-defined, as well as its role in the organisational system (Scott, 2003). Open Social Systems theory rejects the notion that educational organisations are independent of their external environments. This theory suggests that the boundaries of organisations are broader and not easily identified. It further suggests that districts go through a transformation process by continuously taking resources from their environment in the collaborative pursuit of specified goals (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). The contention is that it is unrealistic to assume that the district's behaviour, as with any other organisation, “could be isolated from external forces” (Hoy & Miskel, 2008, p. 18).

Resources and political pressures affect the internal operations of the district. Bush (2003, p. 42) argues that organisations ought to function as “open systems, which assume permeable boundaries and interactive two-way relationship [with] their environments... not simply responding to external demands”. Owens and Valesky (2007) suggest that when there is a loss of permeability in the district boundary, the district is less sensitive to environmental change and may miss identifying resources that may be available. Referring to educational organisations, Hoy and Miskel (2008) and Scott (2003) extend this view by suggesting that

educational systems are social systems that are open because of their permeability and subjectiveness to the environment (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Similarly, Senge, Smith, Kruschwitz, Laur, Schley (2010, p. 44) contend that leadership needs the education to see the larger systems and understand the significance of collaborating across boundaries which “previously divided systems from others within and outside their organisations”.

Systems theory emphasises the adaptability of the organisations to the environment and recognises the organisation's formal and informal features (Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Scott, 2003). The formal feature attributes to the fact that a district organisation is meant to achieve its goals. Hence there has to be a hierarchical structure. Therefore, there is a division of labour, the hierarchy of authority and the formalisation of roles and responsibilities (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Furthermore, there is the aspect of the informal organisation, which focuses on organisational culture and proposes that people or social groups are inevitable features of organisations and their needs are important. These two features, formal and informal, dictate the need for the integration of organisational goals and human needs (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). Also, and most importantly, educational organisations have a technical core that is primarily concerned with the vision and mission (Hoy & Miskel, 2008). This technical core is teaching and learning, which is the core business for education. As discussed in Chapter 2, all other activities that district leaders engage in are secondary.

### **3.3 The Public Educational leadership Project Coherence Framework (PELP Framework)**

The PELP Framework emerged from a collaborative effort by Stacey Childress, Richard Elmore, Allen Grossman, Caroline King and Susan Moore Johnson in 2007. This outline suggests that the education district's performance can be fully understood by initially viewing the district organisations as open social systems. Childress et al. (2007) 's key principle is that effective district-wide improvement centres on the expectation that individual schools' performances differ because of different factors leading to these variations. Consequently, instead of a one-size-fits-all approach, districts need to create a setting where teachers, principals, and district administrators constantly try to discover how and why instructional quality differs within and among schools. Furthermore, district leaders differentiate support “according to the characteristics and needs of a particular school or groups of schools”

(Childress et al., 2007, p. 290). As Childress, Elmore, Grossman, and King (2006, p. 3) contend:

Districts face competing priorities and demands from multiple constituencies at the local, state, and federal levels. Also, unlike private sector organisations, school districts are designated producers of a public good in a particular geographic area and cannot choose to serve some customers and not others. Within these constraints, however, districts are developing mission statements that target increased performance for all students (regardless of race, class, or prior academic performance) as their primary objective.

Childress et al. (2007) theorise that effective district-wide improvement should be centred on the concept that individual schools will differ in their performance and on the factors that lead to those differences (Anderson et al., 2012). Hence, districts need to find a means to create and implement integration strategies to bring consistency into all schools and lead to optimum performance (Childress et al., 2007). This district coherence means: “the various parts of a school district are designed so that they work in sync with one another to achieve district goals” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 2). This framework reports that coherence is key to district leaders in their efforts to improve teaching and learning system-wide by acknowledging the complexity of educational districts. District leaders can achieve this firstly by linking the instructional core with a district-wide improvement strategy—see further discussion in Section 3.3.1. Secondly, by highlighting district elements that support or hinder effective implementation. Thirdly, the PELP Framework helps to “recognise the interdependence of various elements of their school district [which are] culture, systems, and structures, resources, stakeholder relationships, and environment (Childress et al., 2007, p. 2). Further elaboration of these elements is in Sections 3.3.3 and 3.3.4. It also illuminates how these elements strengthen one another to support the implementation of an improvement (Childress et al., 2007). Lastly, it highlights how district leaders can achieve coherence while aware of forces in the environment that positively or negatively impact the enactment of the strategy (Childress et al., 2007). This is further discussed in the following sections.

### **3.3.1 Conceptualising teaching and learning as an instructional core**

As discussed above, the educational system has a technical core mainly concerned with the core business of education. Childress et al. (2007) conceptualise this technical core as the instructional core. Districts have to start with an understanding of the nature of this task (Childress et al., 2007). This work, the instructional core, is the concept that describes the critical teaching and learning that goes into the classroom (Childress et al., 2007). It is based on the idea that “increases in student learning occur only as a consequence of improvements in the level of content, teachers’ knowledge and skill, and student engagement” (City et al., 2009, p. 24). Hence, focusing on all three components of the instructional core is necessary to enhance teaching and learning.. Also, changes to any one part of the core are insufficient without corresponding changes to the other components (Childress et al., 2007; City et al., 2009). For example, if there is an improvement strategy for the new curriculum, an investment in teachers' new knowledge and skills is important. This will enable them to teach that curriculum if the expectation is to contribute to student learning. Otherwise, the strategy will produce “low-level teaching of high-level content” (City et al., 2009, p. 26). Concerning the DOs understanding of their role in supporting teaching, the concept of an instructional core helped ascertain if participants viewed teaching and learning as comprised of the teacher, learner, and content. It also helped me to examine if the DOs understood the need for alignment among these three components.

### **3.3.2 Theory of change and strategy**

PELP underscores the importance of the district’s theory of action as a driving force that, in practice and action, must support the instructional core. The theory of change is the organisation’s collective belief about the relationships between specific actions and desired outcomes. This system provides the link between the mission of increased performance for all students and the organisation's strategy to achieve that goal (Childress et al., 2007). The theory of change is a set of beliefs that guides planning how and why a complex change process would unfold. “Having a well-articulated strategy helps leaders choose what to do, and just as importantly, what not to do” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 4). Without a clear and consistent strategy, districts are often prone to initiating multiple and conflicting programmes. This, in turn, dilutes the impact of scarce fiscal resources, sends mixed communications to key stakeholders and often results in working on misaligned or conflicting priorities. The coherence



of all systems, resources and a focused strategy is essential to district effectiveness to enable school achievement.

The strategy, which surrounds the theory of change in the framework, is “the set of actions a district deliberately undertakes to strengthen the instructional core to increase student learning and performance district-wide” (Childress et al., 2007, p, 181). Childress et al. (2007) note that having a well-articulated strategy helps leaders choose what to do, and just as importantly, what not to do. Without this clear and consistent approach, districts are often prone to initiating multiple and conflicting programmes that are misaligned. They further assert that a district must begin at the nucleus of its organisation—teaching and learning—and develop a strategy from the inside out. The strategy should be grounded in providing capacity and support to the instructional core's three components—teachers’ knowledge and skill, student engagement, and academically challenging content. This is based on the argument that projects tend to be started one after the other without a clear strategy, often moving on related yet disconnected trajectories. PELP suggests that a strategy cannot be prescribed for the districts. However, gaining coherence among actions across the district, schools and classrooms would make a chosen strategy “more scalable and sustainable” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 44). The strategy also considers five organisational elements critical to the successful implementation of a district-wide improvement strategy, namely, culture, structures and systems, resources, and stakeholders. Below is a further discussion of these elements.

### **3.3.3 Interdependent district elements**

The PELP Framework denotes that five district organisational elements are critical for the successful district leadership efforts of supporting teaching and learning. These elements are culture, structures and systems, resources and stakeholders. As for this study, the PELP Framework highlights how these elements support or hinder DOs’ endeavours of supporting teaching and learning. Discussions for each of these elements follow in the sub-sections below.

#### **3.3.3.1 Culture**

One of the five elements is the importance of the district culture. Culture consists of norms, values, attitudes, and beliefs that define and drive behaviour in the district. Whether these are strong or weak, they do not change spontaneously in response to policies or slogans. According to Schein (1992, p. 12), group culture is:

A pattern of basic assumptions that the group learned as it solved its problems of external adaptation and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid and therefore, to be taught to new members as a correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems.

Moreover, Owens (2004) contends that district culture's quality and characteristics significantly influence the DOs efforts to improve teaching and learning. Childress et al. (2006) argue that public educational organisations have long had a culture that valued effort more than results. They support this assertion by stating that as long as people seem to be working hard, they could remain unaccountable for their students' performance. However, they also contend that this is no longer acceptable in today's accountability environment. As a result, districts must establish a culture of collaboration, high expectations, and accountability. Childress et al. (2007) posit that district leaders often view culture as something fluid that challenges management. However, leaders can upset or modify entrenched counterproductive culture by taking specific actions such as redefining roles or relationships, altering performance expectations, and using job roles in creative ways (Childress et al., 2007). There are some examples of norms and beliefs to consider on the DOs' understanding of their role in supporting teaching and learning. These include attitudes towards accountability, orientation towards students and staff, conflict resolution methods, reciprocity between the district office and schools, and DOs' approach to stakeholders. The concept, district culture, helped understand what norms, behaviours, and beliefs held by DOs helped them support teaching and learning and whether the culture in the two district cases hindered or supported the DOs attempts to support schools.

#### ***3.3.3.2 Structures and systems***

Two additional elements of the district include structures and systems. While structures and systems are separate elements, Childress et al. (2007) contend that these are interdependent and discussed together. Structures help define how the district's work gets done and include how people are organised, responsible and accountable for results and who makes or influences decisions (Childress et al., 2007). Structures can be formal (deliberately established organisational systems) and informal (the way decisions get made or the way people work and interact outside formal hierarchies). School districts manage teaching and learning through a multiplicity of systems, which are the processes in how they undertake the work. The purpose

of systems is to increase the district's efficiency in implementing the strategy (Childress et al., 2007). Some can be formally designed by the district, while others could emerge informally in practice. Proponents of PELP suggest that education districts should develop systems to respond and manage a plethora of external demands. For example, recent policies emphasise quality, which exerts pressure on districts to develop complex systems to manage better and improve learner performance.

Childress et al. (2007) concluded that structures and systems include roles and responsibilities, reporting relationships, teams, accountability mechanisms, compensation arrangements, resource allocation methods, organisational learning processes, and training programmes. These authors contend that historically, districts develop systems and structures arbitrarily to support generations of improvement efforts. Consequently, these systems and structures would persist even when they are no longer relevant and, therefore, would constrain rather than enable improvement efforts and strategies (Childress et al., 2007). The structures and systems often have to be reinvented to effectively support a strategy.

#### ***3.3.3.3 Resources***

The fourth element of the PELP Framework is resources. Any organisation has a range of different assets to which it has access (Scott, 2003). Childress et al. (2007) posit that managing the flow of financial resources throughout the organisation is important, but resources also include people and physical assets such as technology and data. They contend that when school districts carefully manage their resources, namely, people, physical and financial resources, and invest in technology and data systems to better support teaching and learning, these bring the entire district closer to coherence. Furthermore, district and school leaders must think rigorously about how to deploy the organisation's most valuable asset, which is its people. Their skills and knowledge needed to successfully implement the strategy and analysis of gaps between what they know and what the strategy requires of them need serious consideration. Districts should also strategise how financial resources flow throughout the organisation so that they are more coherent with the strategy and likely to produce the desired outcomes (Childress et al., 2006). While financial resources and people are important, building the technology infrastructure necessary to support demands from external accountability mechanisms is imperative (Childress et al., 2007). Technology is also significant as if

effectively utilised; it enables the management of learner performance data regularly; consequently, it supports districts' processes that require the teachers and DOs to use data to make better instructional decisions. As a result, strategic investments in data systems are necessary to make these more effective instructional decisions that are directly responsive to their students' learning needs (Childress et al., 2007). As this framework suggests, I needed to ascertain what resources DOs expected to support schools and how they aligned those resources with their strategies of supporting teaching and learning.

#### **3.3.3.4 Stakeholders**

Stakeholders are people and groups inside and outside the organisation who have a legitimate interest in the district and can influence the effectiveness of the strategy (Childress et al., 2007). These stakeholders include teachers' unions, parents, students, school governing bodies, community and civic groups, and local politicians, municipal constituencies, professional organisations, and policymakers. However, managing stakeholder relationships in a way that is coherent with the strategy is challenging because stakeholders rarely agree on a definition of success. Therefore, district leaders need to persuade a majority of the stakeholder groups to back the strategy or secure the backing of those with enough power to prevent other stakeholders from hindering the strategy (Childress et al., 2007). For this study, this concept helped me ascertain from the DOs' views which stakeholders they considered significant in driving the strategy of supporting teaching and learning in their districts.

#### **3.3.4. Environment**

The outermost layer of the framework represents the districts' environment and includes regulations and legislation, contracts, funding, and politics. These factors are primarily outside of the direct control of district leaders but can significantly influence district strategy and operations (Childress et al., 2007). A district's environment includes all of the external factors that can impact strategy, operations, and performance. Embracing the notion of viewing districts as open social systems is to "acknowledge that districts are penetrated by their environments in ways that blur and confound any simple criterion for distinguishing one from the other" (Scott, 2003, p. 186). As a result, identifying customers, clients, and stakeholders become a challenge (Scott, 2003). Furthermore, in the districts, the work occurs not only in certain classrooms but also in all classrooms across all schools. Schools "are nested within

districts, which are uniquely positioned to ensure equity and to increase the capacity of all schools - not just some - to succeed” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 1).

The environment includes the various funding sources available (both public and private), the political and policy context at the city, state, and national levels, the collective bargaining arrangements in place, and the characteristics of their particular community (Childress et al., 2007). The concept suggests that district leaders have little direct control over the environment. However, they must spend significant time trying to manage its effects to consistently implement a district-wide strategy (Childress et al., 2007). The environment can impact districts by enforcing non-negotiable demands while restricting decision-making, limiting resources, evaluating performance, and imposing sanctions. The environment can also serve as an enabler if the district leadership can influence the regulatory legislation, contractual, financial, and political forces surrounding them. As a result, I sought to understand what district leaders considered factors in the environment and determine how these created demands, constraints, or opportunities, affecting their ability to implement their strategy.

### **3.3.5 Differentiation and integration**

Another key construct of the PELP Framework is differentiation and integration. Childress et al. (2007) propose that individual schools differ in their performance and factors leading to those differences. As a result, this should be central to district strategy for effective district-wide improvement. They argue that district offices need to “provide optimum support to enable schools with varying leadership capabilities, instructional capacity, and student mix to achieve continuous improvement in academic performance for all students” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 289). They further contend that a “one-size-fits-all” approach and structural changes such as centralised and decentralised approaches have not positively impacted teaching and learning improvement.

Therefore, districts must discover how to differentiate the support to schools according to their individual performance needs and related contexts. Education districts in SA, like many other countries, are inclusive of schools that perform well as well as schools that underperform. The school contexts also differ in terms of socioeconomic status. In these individual schools, some learners perform well while others do not. Learners, teachers, and school leaders, including principals, differ in their capabilities. As a result, a varied approach in implementing district

strategies across schools, district-wide, is essential (Childress et al., 2007). While differentiating support, districts also need to develop and implement integration strategies to bring about consistency into systems of schools (Childress et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2012). The contention is that if integration is underestimated, education districts will “risk their schools becoming fragmented into isolated units that are likely to continue producing variable performances” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 290). However, “differentiation and integration are not opposing forces: rather, they complement each other and work together to shape an environment that will lead to optimum performance for every school” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 290).

Differentiation and integration will ensure support for individual schools while sustaining improvement across all schools. Childress et al. (2007) grouped integrating mechanisms into four groups, namely, accountability, organisational learning, strategic operating function, and policy. Accountability is a common understanding of expectations across all schools regarding learner performance throughout the district. Organisational learning is what the DOs undertake to ensure that district staff and school management, including principals and teachers, improve their skills to spread effective practices across all classrooms and schools. Strategic, operational functions include the use of human resources, information systems for collecting, analysing and managing performance data, as well as district-wide resource allocation systems. Policies should include parameters for managing the curriculum, student discipline or community engagement that support district strategy (Childress et al., 2007). These mechanisms are vital for district-wide teaching and learning improvement.

The PELP Framework provided a useful lens to explore this study’s findings and guided me to examine the interaction between the DOs’ practices creating coherence by integrating their strategies to support teaching and learning across the district. Furthermore, it helped me to examine which leadership practices lead to recognition of the need of the DOs to support schools according to the differentiated needs for school improvement in two districts. Even though this framework does not prescribe what district leaders should do to support teaching and learning, it focuses on the importance of coherence and alignment of the DOs’ actions to make their efforts more “scalable and sustainable” (Childress et al., 2007, p. 44). Another strength of this framework is how it depicts coherence in sustaining teaching and learning outcomes in the instructional core, including all the factors and elements that districts could

consider when supporting schools. All of these define the district as a system with the moral goal of improving teaching and learning, that is, an instructional core across all schools with the necessary management of the environment (Elmore, 2000; Childress et al., 2007). I view the concepts of differentiation and integration as useful for this study as they reveal the variability of teaching and learning quality across schools within the districts. While the PELP Framework was useful, it seemed less explicit conceptually about leadership processes and practices of the DOs when developing and implementing strategies for supporting teaching and learning in schools. I discuss ALT below.

### **3.4 Adaptive Leadership Theory**

As discussed in Section 2.2, educational leadership plays a significant role in facilitating the improvement of learning outcomes in educational systems that promote quality teaching and learning (Leithwood & Louis, 2012). However, the environment within which educational leaders need to work is dynamic and complex, exacerbated by continuous changes and external pressures (Fullan, 2009; Senge et al., 2012). Responding to this complexity, Owens and Valesky (2007) postulated that educational leaders' challenges demand finding new ways of illuminating these uncertain and complex conditions. Proponents that view the work of the districts as primarily supporting teaching and learning believe that their efforts would be more successful if they address both technical and adaptive aspects of the instructional core (City et al., 2009; Senge et al., 2012; Fullan, 2009). This approach indicates that district leaders face challenges requiring leadership to tackle complex problems and issues with collective, collaborative, timely, effective, and innovative solutions. These challenges are a result of the interconnectedness and interdependency of elements and permeability of the environment, as discussed in the previous section. This requires leadership extending beyond the range of leadership theories that focus on traits and behavioural approaches. Owens and Valesky (2007, p. 271) contend that the “problems facing schools today, particularly problems of school reform, are adaptive problems and require adaptive leadership concepts and techniques.” In adopting this theory, I sought to use these concepts as discussed in Sections 3.4.1 to 3.4.4 to ascertain if the DOs used them to understand their role and enacted their leadership practices to support teaching and learning.

In addition to OSS, I also utilised the ALT that emerged primarily from the seminal work of Ronald Heifetz (1994) extended upon with subsequent co-authors (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Heifetz et al., 2009; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). Adaptive Leadership Theory emerges as a contemporary leadership approach that aims “to capture the complexity of leadership processes in modern organisations” (Yukl & Mahsud, 2010, p.83). It is inclined to the leader-follower relationship and also contemplates the external factors in the environment within which leaders and followers work (Glover, Rainwater, Friedman, & Jones, 2002). Referring to complexity in educational organisations, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) posit that educational leadership in times of complexity is not easy; thus, those in management positions cannot impose what they already know with the hope that it will address complex challenges. They contend:

The adaptive challenges facing education communities today are as sacred in their importance as they are difficult. At times, they may seem intractable. The competition for scarce resources has been further intensified by the new demands....Policymakers are demanding performance accountability measures for students and educators that bring into question deeply held notions of good teaching, good learning, and success in the classroom; these accountability measures also force us to face our long-standing acceptance of the wide gaps in the achievement between rich and poor students...We will not meet our current challenges by waiting for [high authority] to figure out the answers...In this complex environment, it is more important than ever that educators at all levels exercise adaptive leadership (Heifetz & Linsky, 2004, p. 37).

Adaptive Leadership Theory is based on the conception that a problem or situation has no clear solution within the existing framework of the status quo. Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 25) explain that because adaptive work is the result of adaptive challenges, it then requires “a change in values, beliefs, or behaviour on the part of those with interest in the problem.” This theory is relevant for this study as I view the education district’s leadership role and practices to support teaching and learning in schools as a complex undertaking. As Owens (2004, p. 280) contends:

[e]ducational organisations today are confronted by demands for near-constant change in dealing with problems that are highly complex, often ill-understood, and



ambiguous and with outcomes that are uncertain. As a result, educational organisations must be [competent], adaptable, and responsive.

Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 14) define adaptive leadership as “the practice of mobilising people to tackle tough challenges and thrive” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 14). This view is consistent with perceiving leadership as a practice instead of viewing it as the traits of positional leaders. For the DOs, this mobilisation does not happen in the conventional practice of authority from the top down but rather requires a mind shift that redefines traditional views of leadership and distributes authority to all key stakeholders, often across multiple systems (Senge et al., 2010). Fullan (2001, p. 3) shares the same sentiments and argues that leadership “is not mobilising others to solve problems that we already know, but to help them confront problems that have never yet been successfully addressed.” Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 295) assert that thriving is not just about survival; it means “growing and prospering in new and challenging environments.” Referring to education, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) posit that:

Leadership in education means mobilising schools, families, and communities to deal with some difficult issues – issues that people often prefer to sweep under the rug. The challenges of student achievement ...generate real but thorny opportunities for each of us to demonstrate leadership every day in our roles.

Heifetz and Laurie (1997) speculate that adaptive leadership views leadership as an activity instead of personal traits or formal processes and may not require authority and power to be effective. They further contend that leadership takes place every day and cannot be the responsibility of the few, an exceptional experience, or a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity. As a result, leadership requires a learning strategy. Hence, with or without authority, a leader has to engage people in confronting the challenge by adjusting their values, modifying their perspectives, and learning new practices. Theorising adaptive leadership, Heifetz et al. (2009) ground this approach on the concepts, namely, illusion of the broken system, technical and adaptive challenges, leadership and authority, living in the disequilibrium and getting on the balcony. Below is the discussion of each construct.

### **3.4.1 The Illusion of the Broken System**

In outlining ALT, Heifetz and his colleagues posit that it is a fallacy resulting in unsuccessful change initiatives to envisage that organisations need to change because they are “dysfunctional.” They contend that though appearing dysfunctional, some existing organisations may, in reality, be best equipped to achieve their current purpose. Heifetz et al., (2009) argue that social systems are established in certain ways because those in organisations want them to function that way. These scholars assert that it is vital for leaders to reconsider how they approach the problem. If they understand that an organisation that seems inoperative works for some people, they will propose different means and approaches. Instead of persuading people to support their views, leaders will learn to focus on mobilising and supporting them through a change that appears uncertain and frightening. Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 17) cite Lawrence, who articulates that “[there] is no such thing as a dysfunctional organisation because every organisation is perfectly aligned to achieve the results it currently gets.” They further elaborate that the system may seem dysfunctional because it has decided to accommodate “the gap between the espoused value and the current reality, the value in practice” (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 18). This means that the DOs beliefs about their role may not align with what they do. From the data, I had to ascertain whether their leadership roles in supporting teaching and learning were in line with their practices.

### **3.4.2 Distinguishing Technical Problems from Adaptive Challenges**

Heifetz et al. (2009; see also Heifetz, 1994; Heifetz & Linsky 2002) distinguish between technical and adaptive problems. They assert that while technical problems can be very complex and relevant, the solutions are familiar. They may resolve by applying authoritative expertise and the organisation’s current structures, procedures, and methods. Owens and Valesky (2007, p. 271) elaborate that technical problems can resolve by applying technical competence, while adaptive problems are “complex and involve so many ill-understood factors that the outcomes of any course of action are unpredictable”. Adaptive challenges require new learning and can only be confronted by changing people’s assumptions, beliefs, habits, and commitments (Heifetz et al., 2009). These also require the involvement of many or all stakeholders to create and implement an optimal solution. Heifetz (1994) defines adaptive challenges as problems that are not well understood by the organisations facing them and for which there is no well-known solution. Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 19) further elaborate: “making

progress requires going beyond any authoritative expertise to mobilise discovery, shedding certain entrenched ways, tolerating losses, and generating the new capacity to thrive anew.”

Even though expertise and existing knowledge may be useful in solving adaptive problems, the most critical work is to mobilise and guide people through a period of discovery resulting in the transformed capacity to manifest. However, Heifetz et al. (2009) argue that most managers have the strength of their professional or technical knowledge, assisting them in tackling technical challenges and solving them through logic and experience. They further argue that this default response does not work well on adaptive challenges. Sharing the same view, Lemons and Helsing (2009, p. 482) concluded that when district leaders apply technical solutions to adaptive problems, they “actually inhibit organisational and individual learning necessary to tackle the adaptive problem”. Heifetz et al. (2009) identified four contexts to distinguish complex adaptive challenges from technical challenges. First, a gap may exist between expected values and behaviours. Second, individuals or organisations may experience competing demands. Third, controversial or sensitive issues remain prevalent because people avoid articulating an opposing position. As a result, speaking out on a particular problem or “elephant in the room” becomes a personal risk. Lastly, people may avoid it because the task moves outside of their comfort level. Heifetz (1994) and Heifetz et al. (2009) pronounce that although these contexts do not describe all possible scenarios, each perspective provides a model for identifying and responding to adaptive challenges.

Daly and Chrispeels (2008, p. 32) posit that technical leadership, or first-order change, are “those changes that are in line with current belief and value structures.” Technical changes apply ‘fixes’ to problems that exist within a system, with the solutions bounded by existing paradigms. Adaptive Leadership, or second-order change, is most often related to individuals forming the conditions to challenge prevailing values and norms. Heifetz et al. (2009) mention a cycle of failure and a persistent dependence on authority are two specific indicators that illustrate how organisations confront adaptive challenges. The logic behind the cycle of failure is that people gravitate towards technical solutions because these worked in the past, are easier to apply and reduce uncertainty. Unfortunately, this persists even if the proof of failure is evident in the hope of a different result. Even when people realise the adaptive challenge because they are enmeshed in their ‘defaults’, it becomes practically impossible to gain the balcony view that may give an overview needed to completely identify a problem (Heifetz et

al., 2009). Default behaviours are familiar and comfortable ways of thinking and acting that rest on beliefs and assumptions that may have been useful for solving problems in the past (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Furthermore, clarifying “a complex situation such as [adaptive challenge as the case of managing teaching and learning] requires multiple vantage points, each of which adds a piece to the puzzle” (Heifetz, 1994, p. 22). Heifetz et al. (2009) argue that the most common cause of failure in leadership is treating adaptive challenges as if they were technical problems. Furthermore, Heifetz et al. (2009, p. 19) contend that due to the “complexity in any organisation, problems do not always come clearly labelled as either “technical” or “adaptive” or rather “arrive with a big T or A stamped on it”; problems usually come tangled with both the technical and adaptive elements, see Table 3.1 below.

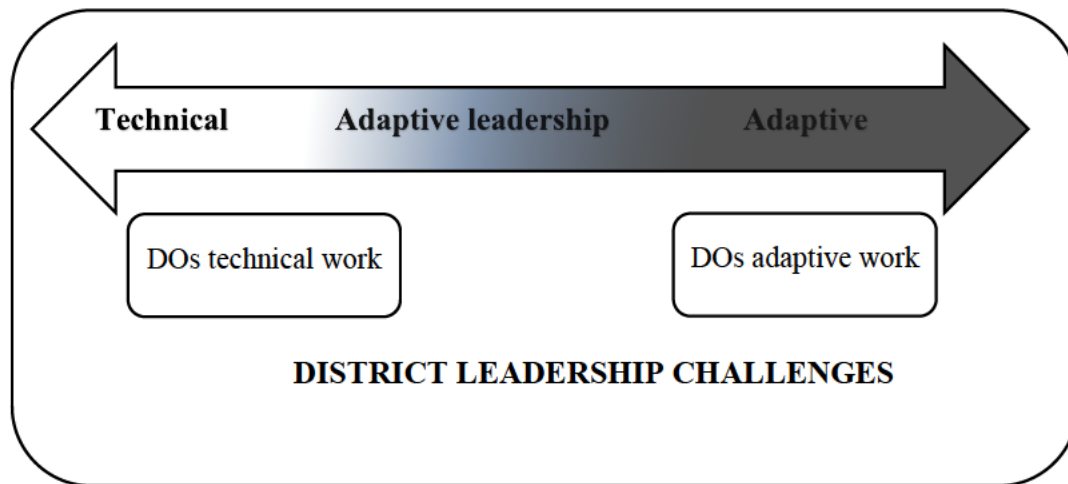
*Table 3.1: Distinguishing technical and adaptive problems. Adapted from Heifetz et al. (2009)*

Challenge	Problem definition	Solution	Locus of work
Technical	Clear	Clear	Authority
Technical and adaptive	Clear	Requires learning	Authority and stakeholders
Adaptive	Requires learning	Requires learning	stakeholders

Adaptive Leadership Theory suggests that for many problem contexts, for example, in education districts, challenges likely range on a continuum from purely technical to purely adaptive, with most situations having some combination of technical and adaptive challenges (see Figure 3.1). Furthermore, it may also depend on the context and task at hand for the DOs. Heifetz et al. (2009) also contend that adaptive challenges have non-linear inputs and outputs due to the complexity of the demands.

### **3.4.3 Distinguishing Leadership from Authority**

Another distinction made by ALT is between two concepts, sometimes complex constructs in leadership literature. These concepts are leadership and authority. Heifetz (1994) contends that clarity is necessary for the conflation between leadership and authority. He asserts that the combination of these two constructs occurs in everyday language and further elaborates by



*Figure 3.1: District Adaptive Leadership Continuum*

stating that we often speak of a leader who has positional and power influence and views this as limiting the understanding of leadership. Heifetz (1994) points out, “[authority] becomes a tool in a strategy to mobilise adaptive work [by the community] towards a solution, rather than a direct means to institute one” (p.87). When faced with adaptive challenges, dependence on authority is problematic because authority works well when dealing with technical challenges that fit within authoritative expertise. However, authorities cannot solve an adaptive challenge by issuing a directive or gathering a group of experts because the solutions to adaptive problems lie in new attitudes, competencies, and coordination of the people with the problem itself...[if] problems lie in the people, the solutions lie in them too (Heifetz et al., 2009, p. 74).

Heifetz et al. (2009) assert that people often treat leadership as a job and confuse it with power and authority; they conceptualise leadership as a practice, an activity or a process and regard it as “a verb, not a job.” As opposed to leadership, authority is given to you by others with the expectation that you provide expertise, take certain actions, find solutions, and deliver a service. Any role has a well-defined scope of authority that stipulates what is expected to satisfy those who have given this authority (Heifetz et al., 2009). Due to the complexity of a district, as I discussed in Section 3.2, district leadership should be blended between formal-role authority as well as leadership involving the “collective intelligence of all employees at all levels across boundaries” (Heifetz & Laurie, 1997, p. 58). The authority figure ensures that the organisation survives by providing the course, protection, and order (Heifetz et al., 2009). According to Heifetz (1994, p. 49), “having authority brings not only resources to bear but also

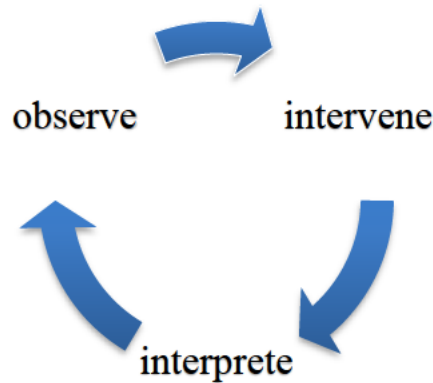
serious constraints on the exercise of leadership.” Finding oneself in the paradox of leading while challenging followers’ expectations of authority is a key challenge of leaders in authority. This is what Heifetz calls “razor's edge” (Heifetz, 1994). The adaptive leader is prepared to disrupt the equilibrium and ask people to step into new and unknown zones that seem perilous, disturbing and disorienting. However, authority and leadership operate in synchronisation. On the one hand, authority stabilises, while on the other hand, leadership disturbs by stretching the social system's adaptive capacity. In this study, I hoped to discover if the DOs had approached leadership by employing both authority and leadership as a collaborative engagement with schools and other stakeholders in pursuit of supporting teaching and learning.

Furthermore, Heifetz and Linsky (2004) explained that adaptive problems generally involve many different stakeholders with varied interpretations of the issues. Elmore (2000) attests to this when he suggests that top-down leadership strategies, for example, restructuring the curriculum, developing standards-based assessments, and setting compliance benchmarks, are suitable for technical problems. However, for leaders to address adaptive problems, for example, ensuring that all students achieve high levels, they need to engage all stakeholders in the process. He further states that “most of the knowledge required for improvement must inevitably reside in the people who deliver instruction, not in the people who manage them” (Elmore, 2000, p. 14). It would be vital for me to ascertain if DOs do collaborate with the teachers and how they involve them when developing and implementing their strategies.

#### **3.4.4 Getting on the balcony**

Exercising adaptive leadership practices, Heifetz et al. (2009; see also Heifetz & Linsky, 2002) argue that adaptive challenges require leaders to step back from the situation to have a clear perspective. Heifetz and Linsky (2002, p. 53) use the metaphor “getting on the balcony above the dance floor” as a perspective for stepping out of the situation and finding perspective amid a challenging situation for a strategic approach. By “going to the balcony,” a leader can see and assess gaps between goals and current performance (Nicolaidis & McCallum, 2013). Otherwise, one is likely to misperceive the situation and diagnose the situation incorrectly, “leading to misguided decisions about whether or how to intervene” (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002, p. 53). Heifetz and Linsky (2002, see also Heifetz et al., 2009) suggest that there are three core leadership activities to adaptive work. These include, firstly, observing events and patterns and taking in this information as data without making judgement or assumptions about its meaning.

Secondly, tentatively interpreting observations by developing multiple meanings about what data could mean. Lastly, designing interventions based on observations and interpretations in the service of making progress on the adaptive challenge. See Figure 3.2.



*Figure 3.2: Adaptive leadership process extracted from Heifetz et al. (2009)*

Supporting this view, Senge et al. (2012, p. 73) posit that “most of us spend the bulk of our work time enmeshed in the ‘dance’ of day-to-day urgencies and tasks.” He further asserts that effective leaders “step away from the dance and observe the patterns and dynamics as if from above.” It is also from ‘the balcony’ that leaders rediscover their focus and re-orientate themselves when faced with confusion or uncertainty. Like organisations, a leader is a complex entity with competing values, interests, preferences, inclinations, aspirations, and fears. By understanding the personal system, a leader can make the choices necessary to lead an organisation successfully through adaptive work. Heifetz et al. (2009) theorise that often leaders are so consumed in the field of action that they cannot diagnose problems. Leaders need the ability to step back and view the different processes as if standing on a balcony to see the whole picture. Only then can they identify value conflicts and power struggles, recognise patterns of work avoidance and dysfunctional system procedures (Heifetz et al., 2009).

Acting and thinking politically is another adaptive leadership practice in that adaptive leaders need to use their awareness of stakeholders’ interests, network of influence and power, including their positions in the organisation, to create alliances with people who will support the organisations’ change initiatives. However, Heifetz et al. (2009) warn that a leader needs to “keep the work at the centre of people’s attention” to ensure that stakeholders share the load of challenging work with the leader. Staying connected to the purpose and keeping it alive by

reflecting on the ethics of leadership and purpose is essential. This could be done by questioning their interpretations, the data used to evaluate outcomes, justify their behaviours, and make decisions and ensure that they keep their purpose alive (Heifetz et al., 2009). Faced with unprecedented uncertainty and continuous change, DOs must depict adaptive leadership. Due to the nature of complexity in educational organisations, traditional leadership theories may fail to guide educational leaders effectively. Hence, school districts exercising adaptive leadership might benefit from the complex challenges confronting DOs.

### **3.5. Three-pronged theoretical framework**

It emerges that adopting OSS for this study means considering the complex nature of the education districts. Also, there are elements in the districts that are interdependent in nature. According to Senge et al. (2010, p. 6), “seeing problems of each element of the system as separate and approaching it separately will result in coming up with solutions that are short term, opportunistic, ‘quick fixes’ that do nothing to address deeper imbalances.” Moreover, the PELP Framework stresses the importance of the environment with its permeable boundaries due to the loosely coupled nature of the district. Lastly, OSS emphasises the importance of the district leaders’ understanding that the technical core, teaching, and learning, should be prioritised as an essential business. While OSS examines interdependent elements, it does not explicitly specify these elements. For this reason, I adopted the PELP Framework proposed by Childress et al. (2007) because it is explicit about the interdependent elements in the district.

Furthermore, due to the complex nature of the leadership practice of supporting teaching and learning in schools, I used the ALT model proposed by Heifetz et al. (2009) for this study. These theories constitute a framework that I used as a map to provide a lens for this study in examining education DOs’ understanding of their role and their leadership practices for supporting teaching and learning. Below, I discuss this theoretical framework.

### **3.6. Conclusion**

In summary, Chapter 3 discussed a three-pronged theoretical framework for the study. Open social systems theory suggests that districts as organisations become efficient when they embrace the complexities as a result of the interdependencies of the elements within the district. Furthermore, the environment is key to the district leaders’ effective behaviours that support



schools. While OSS is relevant for this study, its limitation is the abstract nature of the elements and environment as it does not give insights into what elements within the districts and the environment the DOs could consider. It was for this reason that I decided to adopt the PELP Framework. In applying this framework, I had a useful lens to review possible DOs' leadership efforts to support teaching and learning. It specified the elements that DOs engage with: the instructional core, strategy, culture, structure, system resources, stakeholders, and educational environment. The PELP Framework illuminated the complexity of the district by highlighting the elements and environment to be considered by DOs when strategising leadership support for the instructional core in schools. Also, it illuminates the fact that the DOs cannot use a one-size-fits-all approach, and challenges may be technical and adaptive depending on the context. However, it did not help me evaluate the leadership practices used by DOs when seeking the strategies and theories of change to support the instructional core.

I propose that Heifetz's adaptive leadership model helps explain the DOs' leadership practices that support teaching and learning. Heifetz's theory of adaptive leadership is organised around two key distinctions. Firstly, the distinction between technical and adaptive problems and the distinction between leadership and authority. I have shown that the first distinction focuses on the leadership practices required by DOs to deal with problems with known solutions compared to those that emphasise learning and innovation. The second distinction provides a framework for assessing resources and developing leadership strategies depending on whether or not they have the authority. This theory also conceptualises adaptive leadership as a shared activity in which leaders who hold formal and informal authority and stakeholders face technical and adaptive dilemmas. It highlights the sharing of power for all school district officials as vital to enhancing the potential for quality teaching and learning. Although the implementation of adaptive leadership is not easy, as Heifetz (1994) theorised it as *leadership without easy answers*, this theory is relevant in explaining leadership as a shared activity among DOs within a loosely connected structure as in South African districts.

Ultimately, my study used these three theories to understand the role of the DOs as well as their leadership practices for supporting teaching and learning in schools. Integrating these theories illustrates that for DOs to support schools, their practices and roles should be such that they see teaching and learning as the interdependency of teachers, learners, and content, as discussed above. For DOs to support this instructional core, they need to have a strategy and

theory of change. Most importantly, they need to understand that there are elements that work in synchronisation that need to be managed and considered that are interrelated and interdependent. The other most important construct is the environment that is beyond the DOs' control. However, when managed, DOs can minimise the environment's negative impact on their strategy and take advantage of the opportunities available in the environment. With these elements and the environment in this complex district system, challenges and work could demand that DOs exercise adaptive leadership. The other useful concepts for my study are the "balcony view" and integration and differentiation. With all these components and leadership concepts in the district system, district-wide teaching and learning outcomes could be affected, followed by schools' outcomes and eventually affect learner outcomes. Chapter 4 discusses the research design and methodology for the study.

## **CHAPTER 4**

### **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY**

#### **4.1 Introduction**

This qualitative study aimed to explore the leadership role of DOs in supporting teaching and learning in two districts in Gauteng Province in SA. This chapter sets out the research design and methodology and discusses the philosophical stance as well as the choice of the qualitative approach adopted for the study. It further outlines the research methodology, including the sampling process, data generation methods, and data analysis. It then explores my positionality and reflexivity, then discusses trustworthiness and deliberations of relevant ethical considerations. This chapter then concludes with a summary of the chapter.

#### **4.2 Locating the study within the philosophical stance of the constructivist paradigm**

It is widely believed that a paradigm constitutes the researchers' philosophical and theoretical stances which influence the decisions they make about their methodological approaches, choice of research methods and procedures (Creswell, 2012; Creswell & Poth, 2018; Crotty, 1998; Cohen, Manion, & Morrison, 2011; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2005, 2010; Merriam, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). According to Mertens (2010, p. 7), "[a] paradigm is a way of looking at the world. It is composed of certain philosophical assumptions that guide and direct thinking and action." Hence, as a researcher, I began by adopting a particular stance towards the nature of reality (ontology) and knowledge (epistemology) which then directed me to a particular paradigm informing the choice of research methods and procedures (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005; Mertens, 2010; Cohen et al., 2011; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). This qualitative study is located within the constructivist paradigm that assumes subjective epistemology because understandings are co-constructed by the researcher and research participant and naturalistic (Denzin & Lincoln, 2005). Thus, the world does not exist independently of our knowledge of it as in a positivist paradigm. Therefore, we can understand the social world from the standpoint of individuals who participate in it (Cohen et al., 2011). In a constructivist paradigm, the researcher "makes sense of (or interpret) the meanings others have about the world. Rather than starting with a theory (as in post-positivism), inquirers generate or inductively develop a theory or pattern of meaning" (Creswell, 2003, p. 9).

Blaikie (cited in Grix, 2004, p. 59) conceptualises ontology as the study of “claims and assumptions that are made about the nature of social reality, claims about what exists, what it looks like, what units make it up and how these units interact with each other.” My ontological belief is that multiple realities exist and that cultural, historical, ideological and linguistic understanding influence the construction of such multiple realities. I, therefore, assume multiple and dynamic realities that are context-dependent and embrace an ontology that rejects the existence of an external reality. Moreover, as a qualitative researcher, I argue that there is no single unitary reality apart from my participants’ perceptions. Hence, I adopted a relativistic ontology that endorses multiple realities socially constructed by individuals from within their contextual interpretation (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Adopting a relativist ontology ensured that there is no objective reality that can be known. Hence “multiple realities are constructed through our lived experiences and interaction with others” (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 35). This study focused on the multiple realities of DOs regarding their leadership roles in supporting teaching and learning. Different district leaders might have different understandings of their roles in supporting teaching and learning. As a result, multiple perspectives from different participants from both districts provided detailed information about the phenomenon under investigation.

For this study, I utilised Crotty’s definition of epistemology, which he conceptualised it as “the theory of knowledge embedded in the theoretical perspective and thereby in the methodology” (1998, p. 3). Epistemology questions what counts as knowledge and how those knowledge claims are justified. It further questions the relationship between the researcher and the researched. I choose the constructivist paradigm in that I view knowledge as being socially constructed and context-bound. Epistemologically, similar to Stake (1995), Merriam (1998) posits that “the key philosophical assumption upon which all types of qualitative research are based in the view that reality is constructed by individuals interacting with their social worlds” (Merriam, 1998, p. 6). She further contends that “reality is not an objective entity; rather, there are multiple interpretations of reality” (Merriam, 1998, p. 22). She articulates that a qualitative study's primary interest is to understand the meaning constructed by people, which is how they make sense of and experience their context. Furthermore, she further notes that the decision to focus on a qualitative case study stems from the fact that this design is chosen precisely by the

researcher interested in understanding and interpreting rather than testing a hypothesis (Merriam, 1998; Denzin & Lincoln, 2005).

In discussing constructivism, Crotty (1998) identified several assumptions, three of which are significant to this study. Firstly, it is because human beings construct meaning as they engage with the world they are interpreting. As a result, I used open-ended questions so that the participants could share their views. Secondly, humans engage with their world and make sense of it based on their historical and social perspectives. Lastly, the underlying generation of meaning is always social, arising in and out of interaction with a human community. As shall be shown in subsequent chapters, the interpretations and findings in this qualitative research are context-specific.

Within the constructivist paradigm, the participants provided subjective evidence. As a result, I relied on verbatim quotes as evidence as a representation of participants' accounts. However, the meaning was not discovered but constructed through the interaction between perception and the world; I tried to get as close as possible to the participants (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Hence, I gained knowledge of the participants' subjective experiences in the context where they work. Minimising the “objective separateness” between the participants and myself was imperative (Guba & Lincoln, 1998, p. 94). In this case, it was the phenomenon of educational district leadership in supporting teaching and learning from the point of view of the different educational DOs.

#### **4.3 Locating this study within the terrain of the qualitative approach**

A research approach provides a framework for generating and analysing data. I chose a research design that reflected the research process's dimensions to illustrate the purpose of the study (Bryman, 2016). For this study, I adopted the qualitative research design because of the need for a contextual understanding of the experiences of educational DOs that I believe is vital to the construction of the meaning of inductive, holistic knowledge, which aligns well with constructivism. As a researcher, I “believe that the world is made up of people with their own assumptions, intentions, attitudes, beliefs, and values and that, the way of knowing reality is by exploring the experiences of others regarding a specific phenomenon” (Maree, 2007, p. 4). The qualitative research approach allowed for exploring the meanings the DOs ascribe to their

leadership role in supporting teaching and learning from their perspective. I, therefore, concur with Denzin and Lincoln' (2005, p. 3) views when they describe qualitative research as:

a situated activity that locates the observer in the world. It consists of a set of interpretive, material practices that make the world visible. These practices ...turn the world into a series of representations, including field notes, interviews, conversations... recordings and memos to the self. At this level, qualitative research involves an interpretive, naturalistic approach to the world. This means that qualitative researchers study things in their natural settings, attempting to make sense of, or to interpret, phenomena in terms of the meanings people bring to them ... It is understood, however, that each practice makes the world visible in a different way.

Creswell and Poth (2018, see also Merriam, 2009) agree with Denzin and Lincoln (2005) and further summarise the characteristics of qualitative research into four categories. Firstly, qualitative research focuses on meaning and understanding in which the purpose of the research is to achieve understanding, and how people interpret what they experience, culminating in multiple perspectives and diverse views (Creswell & Poth, 2018). This study's primary interest was to understand the meanings the DOs construct from their roles and how they attribute these to their leadership experiences in supporting teaching and learning in schools. Secondly, in qualitative research, the researcher is the key instrument for data generation; as such, he or she emphasises the socially constructed nature of reality. As a qualitative researcher, I see myself as a means to conduct this study to learn about some aspect of the social world, which is educational district leadership (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Thirdly, doing qualitative studies follows an inductive process; that is, researchers generate data from interviews, observations, or documents "from the bottom up" to build concepts in the form of themes, categories or concepts (Creswell, 2014, p. 186). Data generation in qualitative research is not a linear process but an iterative one. Therefore, I had to move back and forth during data analysis, looking at my data to get more evidence that could support the initial themes and eventually integrated data with my literature review and theoretical framework to develop conclusions and lessons from the study (Creswell, 2014).

Qualitative studies occur in natural settings instead of bringing participants to the laboratory or sending instruments for them to complete, as in survey research. It was, therefore, vital that I

generate data in the settings that were familiar to the participants. Furthermore, as a qualitative researcher, I valued the messiness of the lived world, so I assumed that a detailed understanding of the participants' leadership experiences would be gained by exploring these complexities (Rossman & Rallis, 2012). Another significant characteristic of qualitative research is developing a complex and holistic picture of the phenomenon under study. This meant that I had to report the multiple perspectives of DOs and eventually provide a detailed description that emerged (Creswell, 2014). Lastly, the product of qualitative research is a detailed description in the form of words rather than numbers. This could be in the form of quotes from the documents, field notes or participant's interviews to support the findings of the study (Merriam, 2009). This means that qualitative research is useful in its ability to broaden our understanding of "human behaviour and experience...to grasp the processes by which people construct meaning" and describe what those meanings are and represent (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007, p. 43). As a researcher, I believe that qualitative methods provided the most appropriate approach for this study in educational research, where there are complex contextual factors. I also contend that it is virtually impossible to understand a phenomenon without talking to people about it (Merriam, 2009). I value the close relationship between a researcher and participants of the study; hence, I generated data in the field at the site where participants experienced the phenomenon under study. In this regard, I was the primary instrument for data generation and analysis through interviewing the participants, examining the documents, and observing their behaviours (Merriam, 2009; Creswell, 2014).

#### **4.4 Locating the study within Qualitative Case study design**

While qualitative studies widely use the case study design, there seem to be different conceptualisations of this methodological approach related to philosophical orientation. Merriam (1998, p. xi) contends that researchers planning to use case study methodology become confused "as to what a case study is and how it can be differentiated from other types of qualitative research." This is because of the varied perspectives held by case study methodologists making it difficult for researchers to conceptualise case study methodology (Yazan, 2015). Work by widely cited methodologists, Merriam (1998, 2009; See also Stake, 1995; Yin, 2003, 2009, 2014) illustrated how these three authors approach the case study design differently due to their philosophical positions. Unlike Merriam and Stake, who seem to be inclined to constructivist philosophical stance, Yin seems to have a post-positivist stance

based on the belief that there is an objective reality. I considered it necessary to consider different approaches to determine which would best address the purpose of this study and aligned with my philosophical stance (Harrison, Birks, Franklin, & Mills, 2017). I outline the differing theoretical emphases of the three seminal scholars in the next section.

Seemingly, Yin (2003, 2009, 2014) is epistemologically positioned within the post-positivist paradigm. Yin (2014) asserts that while case study methodology as a form of social science can embrace different epistemological orientations, his philosophical orientation is that of a realist. He contends that “...case study research ... appears to be orientated towards *realist* perspective, which assumes the existence of a single reality that is dependent on any observer” (Yin, 2014, p. 17, emphasis original). This is evident in how Yin conceptualises a case study, and his realist orientation is apparent in the terminology used throughout his books. These include theoretical replication, seeking rival explanations and falsifying the hypothesis, causal links, and pattern matching to enhance objectivity (Yin, 2009, 2014). Yin’s (2009, 2014) approach to multiple case studies does not resonate with the constructivist orientation as he justifies the use of these studies to generalise findings. This is discordant with constructivism which foregrounds multiple realities to understanding the phenomenon as the case study design rejects the need to generalise findings. (Stake, 1995; Merriam, 2009). Stake (1995, p. 99) contends that constructivism frames qualitative case study research because knowledge is constructed [not] discovered”.

In summary, Yin (2003, p. 47) describes that case studies should be rigidly structured to either “predict similar results (a literal replication)” or “to predict contrasting results but for predictable reasons (a theoretical replication)”. He believes that structuring a case study should be such that it manages bias and ensures that findings are generalised to other contexts (Harrison et al., 2017). For this reason, I do not adopt Yin’s perspective of case study methodology. Thomas (2010, p. 577) suggests that generalising case study research is problematic and unachievable. Stake (1995, p. 108) further contends that “there are multiple perspectives or views of the case that need to be represented.” For this author, understanding the qualitative case study requires experiencing the activity of the case as it occurs in its contexts and particular situation.



This study utilised a qualitative case study, which is explorative in nature, to answer the research questions discussed in Section 1.4. Choosing this research design assisted in achieving a deeper understanding of how DOs experienced their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. Furthermore, a case study research is useful in designing the study because it emphasises delimiting the case, bounded system, particularity (Merriam, 1998, 2009; Merriam & Tisdell, 2016; Rule & John, 2011; Simons, 2009; Stake, 1995, 2005). The power of a case study is its attention to the local situation, not in how it represents other cases in general. Hence, the case study's focus is on particularisation rather than generalisation to other cases or situations (Stake, 2006).

Furthermore, a qualitative case study is an investigation and in-depth exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, programme or system in a 'real life' context. Giving the rationale for using the case study methodology, Stake (1995, p. 8) asserts:

The real business of case study is particularisation, not a generalisation. We take a particular case and come to know it well, not primarily as to how it is different from others but what it is, what it does. There is an emphasis on uniqueness, and that implies knowledge of others that the case is different from, but the first emphasis is on understanding the case itself.

According to Rule and John (2011, p. 4), a case study is a "systematic and in-depth investigation of a particular instance in its context to generate knowledge." Similarly, Simons (2009, p. 21) states that a case study is "an exploration from multiple perspectives of the complexity and uniqueness of a particular project, policy, institution, program or system in a 'real life' context." As in this study, a case study methodology is useful as the study focuses on a "specific, unique, bounded system," for this study, education district offices (Stake, 1998, p. 88). Thomas (2011, p. 512) posits that while the phenomenon of the study might "satisfy the boundedness and complexity, it would not be a case study unless it could be said to be the case *of* something." This author refers to this as the object of the study, which is the "means of interpreting [the case] or placing it in context" (Thomas, 2011, p. 514). This object of the study "constitutes the analytical frame within which the case is viewed and which the case exemplifies" (Thomas, 2011, p. 515). However, the analytical frame is tentative and may

develop or emerge as the study continues (Ragin, 1992; Thomas, 2016). For this study, the district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in schools was the analytical frame (object), while two educational district offices were the subject.

As this is a qualitative case study, a deeper understanding was essential based on the participants' socially constructed realities in their cultural contexts. It was, therefore, necessary that I choose a collective study involving multiple case studies to illuminate these constructed realities. A collective case study (also called multiple case study) is an “instrumental study extended to several cases”, selecting more than one case because “it is believed that understanding them will lead to better understanding” of the phenomenon. I selected two district offices as “bounded case[s] to illustrate the issue” (Creswell, 2007, p. 74). Referring to a collective case study, Stake (2006, p. 56) postulates: “Individual case studies share a common characteristic or condition. The cases in the collection are somehow categorically bound together. They may be members of a group or examples of a phenomenon”.

In a collective case study research, while the single case is of interest, it belongs to a particular collection of cases that share a common characteristic or condition. With this, I realised that it was appropriate that I collectively studied two cases with common characteristics concerning the demographics of the districts and learner performance. However, I understood that there might be contrasting findings emerging from the generated data.

#### **4.4.1 Sampling the cases and participants of this study**

Selecting sites and participants is essential in qualitative research to get an in-depth understanding of the research problem and answer research questions. Since in case study research boundaries of the case are a defining factor, adequate contextual description to understand the setting or context is required (Stake, 1995, 2005; Merriam, 2009). For this study, the two districts that I chose were exemplary in their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. I initially contacted two education districts by email. This was after the provincial office indicated that these districts were generally perceived to be playing a significant role in supporting teaching and learning. Furthermore, studies show that, where districts are located, districts are structured such that it allows for effective synergy between supporting teaching and learning and “the institutional development and support sub-directorate” (Mavuso, 2013). Furthermore, district offices in this province effectively mediate

between the schools and the head office. Diko et al. (2011, p. 14) suggest that “districts have a range of bodies responsible for the smooth implementation of education policies, and these ensure liaison between the province and the district.”

These districts were also relatively large compared to other districts in the province with variability in demographics, as discussed in the following subsection. In that way, I felt it was going to be vital that I ascertain how DOs managed to close the achievement gap among the schools in their district. Furthermore, I selected members of the district management teams as participants. In qualitative research, selecting the sample of the study is usually purposeful and small, as “opposed to the larger, more random sampling of quantitative research” (Merriam, 1998, p. 8). Purposeful sampling is “a qualitative sampling procedure in which researchers intentionally select individuals and sites to learn or understand the central phenomenon” (Creswell, 2012, p. 626). I purposefully selected two district offices because they seemed to be typical cases based on the information I received from the head office. I supplemented this by the information I received from the website about their demographical data, which indicated that these two districts had been able to sustainably improve Grade 12 learner performance in the past three years. According to Stake (2005, p. 451):

The researcher examines various interests in the phenomenon, selecting case of some typicality but leaning towards those cases that seem to offer an *opportunity to learn*. My choice would be to choose that case from which we feel we can learn most. That may mean taking the one most accessible or one we can spend the most time.

It seemed logical that I began by requesting participation from district directors in these districts, as they are the heads of the district offices. After receiving a positive response regarding their participation, I asked these two district directors to indicate the DMT members whose role was to support teaching and learning to become part of the sample (Creswell, 2012). Furthermore, to achieve a detailed description (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016), I needed to include various DOs within the education district. This selection was based on the willingness and availability of the DOs. After consulting with the district directors and having a brief presentation to explain the purpose of the study, they then suggested members of the DMTs who, at the time of the research, were directly involved in supporting teaching and learning in

schools. District Management Teams include two substructures: The Executive District Management Team (EDMT), comprising the District Director and Chief Education Specialists of the Sub-directorates. This team is responsible for the overall strategic vision and policy management in the district; thus, they had a rich knowledge of the phenomenon under study, hence their suitability as the participants. EDMT further extends to DMT by including DCEs.

After obtaining consent from the District Director, I contacted these participants to request their participation (see Appendix C and D). Initially, I sent requests to 12 participants, and eight agreed to participate. From each district, participants included one CES-CLI, CES - Circuit management (Circuit Manager), DCEs-CLI. These are further discussed in the next chapter. After requesting their participation in the study, the following eight members of the DMTs agreed to participate.

#### Education District 1

1. The District Director
2. CES (Circuit manager)
3. Acting CES (CLI)
4. DCEs (CLI - FET)

#### Education District 2

1. The District Director
2. CES (Circuit manager)
3. CES (CLI)
4. DCEs (CLI - FET)

These eight participants comprised four females and four males. All participants provided different levels of expertise and insight on the phenomenon based on their roles and levels of responsibilities. These DMT members provided insights into their experiences in the district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. They provided insights into their daily activities and practices that support teaching and learning in schools. They also provided different perspectives on what they understood to be their roles. The profiles of the participants are further discussed in the next chapter.

#### ***4.4.1.1 Research sites***

As discussed in the above section, context is vital when designing a case study. Hence, it is inevitable that I discuss the context of this study (Merriam, 2009). These education districts offices are among fifteen districts in the selected province. District offices are intermediaries of the provincial head office and the schools under their care (RSA, 2013). This study was conducted in Education District Office 1 (ED1) and Education District Office 2 (ED2) in Gauteng Province of SA. While geographically, this province is the smallest, it is an economic hub and thus one of the most densely populated provinces with many migrants from other provinces. Hence, the number of learners has been increasing by an annual average of 3700 from 2012 to 2016.

Education Office 1 is a central office managing a 298 square kilometre semi-urban district catering for approximately 118 000 students in about 175 schools with approximately 3 100 classrooms and 4 200 educators. This district includes urban, township as well as schools in the informal settlements. In this district, the learner/classroom ratio is 1:39 (RSA, 2016b). There are 113 primary schools, 40 high schools, and approximately 22 combined schools. Due to the movement of people to this province for job opportunities, the number of learners has been increasing by an average of 3 500 from 2012 to 2016, and most schools have learner enrolment of more than 500 (RSA, 2016b). The district office's distance to most schools is within ten km, with 20 schools in a radius of 25 km and an average of six and a half km. Also, about 54% of schools are from poor socio-economic backgrounds and are categorised as no-fee schools. In this district, the majority population by race is African Blacks being 77% of the total population (RSA, 2016b).

Education Office 2 manages an approximately 1 400 square km semi-urban district, covering urban, township, and schools situated in the informal settlements. This district includes about 200 schools with an enrolment of 170 000 learners. These learners are distributed across about 180 schools with 4 200 classrooms. The learner/classroom ratio is 1:41. There are 125 primary schools and 55 secondary schools with five combined schools. Also, in this district, as in ED1, enrolment has been increasing by an average of 4 000 in the last five years. Most schools (84%) have a learner enrolment of more than 500. Forty-five per cent of schools are within the radius

of 10 km of the district office, with 55% within 25 km. As a result, the district office offers scholar transport for learners staying in a range of 25 km (RSA, 2016b).

In both districts, the Grade 12 pass rate has sustained performance with an average of 89% improved from 2014 to 2016. Besides steady improvement in both districts, the primary challenge concerns learner enrolment spaces due to families relocating to the province for job opportunities. Furthermore, mathematics seems to be a challenge in both districts, especially from Grade 9. Only about 3% received over 50% in Grade 9 2014 ANA Mathematics in both districts. With 2015 Grade 12 gateway subjects, both districts had a 68% pass rate in Mathematics, ED1 got about 69% in Physical Science and 65% in Accounting. ED2 got 58% in Physical Science and 65% in Accounting (RSA, 2016b).

#### **4.4.2 Gaining access to the research sites**

Qualitative researchers “attempt to understand the world from subjects’ points of view and unfold the meaning of their lived world” (Kvale, 2006, p. 481). Therefore, gaining access is a crucial step in research because this process affects the information gathered by the researcher (Merriam, 2009). However, it is documented that researchers aiming at doing qualitative case studies experience challenges in gaining access (Creswell, 2007; Patton, 2002). I believe it important to reflect on my experiences in accessing the research sites and participants for this study. Access and time constraints need attention to ensure that the research study is feasible (Merriam, 2009; Stake, 1995). Due to the nature of this research, it became apparent that I would need to move because I intended to study those districts in the provinces that have shown improvement in teaching and learning. In addition, the performance of the province where these districts are situated has been leading in learner performance, as reflected in their Grade 12 results in the past three years. Fortunately, I received the National Research Foundation (NRF) funding for travel and accommodation to this province, which is about 550 km from my home.

Merriam (2009) suggests that formal access, which refers to the initial process of gaining access and reaching an agreement between the researcher and organisation, is important. This understanding includes conditions about what, when, and how data would be generated and what, if any, might be the return. I did not experience any challenges at this stage. The two district directors showed willingness and were supportive. I was humbled by the openness and

hospitality shown by the district directors, whom I regard as the elite of the society. My experience contrasted with Mikecz (2012, p. 482), who contends that gaining access and trust from people in high positions and “obtaining their accounts” is very challenging. One director indicated that allowing researchers to interview them allows them to reflect on their work. Also apparent was that these district directors felt that they were rarely recognised as contributing towards teaching and learning. They felt that the DOs are always overlooked and often neglected in the roles they play in education. Their views corroborated what I found after my preliminary review of the literature (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Rainey & Honig, 2015) and made it easier for me to develop a rapport with them.

In this instance, the district heads are those who provided and facilitated my access to other participants within the district offices. This was evident in my experience during the process of data generation. Both were helpful, even in facilitating access to more participants (officials) in their districts. All officials showed willingness; most even indicated that they were excited that they could share their experiences. However, it became a challenge to find time for one District Director (DD) due to what the director alluded to “as the nature of their work having to deal with emergencies.” While that was a slight challenge, I eventually managed to secure time to conduct interviews with all district directors. Also, most participants to whom the district directors referred to me showed a willingness to be part of the study.

I started data generation in November 2016 and finished the first set of interviews in March 2017. I then arranged to visit both districts for follow-up interviews, review documents and observations from March–September 2017. Little did I know that one district director would be moved to another district, creating another challenge to access documents and to do observations. However, due to her intervention, I managed to see the participants with whom I started the research process. Consequently, I did two observations in one district. Further difficulties ensued once I had made all the arrangements with the district management for follow-up interviews, as those interview sessions could not take place. This was because one teachers’ union had a strike action on the day of the meeting, and some of the participants were not available. However, seeing that I had already visited the district, I went to the district office to review some of the documents and collected information about the district. This experience shows that having the district directors as initial participants made it easier to get other contributors to the district offices. I initially planned to interview 14 individuals, and only six

did not agree to participate. Furthermore, I realised that as these districts were selected because they were seen as doing well in supporting schools, they felt motivated to share their success stories.

#### **4.4.3 Data generation methods**

Crotty (1998, p. 3) defines methods as “techniques or procedures used to gather or analyse data related to some research question”. As indicated earlier in this chapter, this study was conducted using a case study approach. As a qualitative researcher who locates herself in the constructivist/interpretivist paradigm, I decided to use ‘data generation methods’ instead of ‘data collection methods.’ I believe that knowledge is not just collected but socially constructed. As Merriam (2009, p. 85) contends, while the term data collection is usually utilised, “[i]t should be kept in mind...that ‘the idea that we ‘collect’ data is a bit misleading. Data are not ‘out there’ awaiting collection, like so many rubbish bags on the pavement”. This fits with the constructivist approaches that subscribe to the idea that “social reality is constructed rather than discovered” (Stake, 1995, p. 99). As a research instrument, I was also part of the data generated as I immersed myself in the field to make sense and meaning of my participants’ world of their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in schools within their districts. In this process, I had to create meaning to explain district leadership roles and leadership practices of the DMT. Case study researchers collect detailed information using a variety of data generation procedures over a sustained period (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). I generated data primarily through semi-structured interviews and additionally observations and reviews of documents provided by the DOs. Specifically, I conducted and audiotaped interviews and then transcribed them. I also reviewed documents and did observations to corroborate the interviews (see Appendix B). I then coded and categorised data for emergent themes.

##### ***4.4.3.1 Face-to-face individual interviews with the district officials***

I did one-on-one interviews with the participants in which I asked questions and recorded each participant’s responses. Because my goal was to understand the meaning DOs make of their experiences, I felt that interviewing them would be necessary (Seidman, 2013). Furthermore, studying education district leadership necessitated that I use in-depth interviews because, according to Seidman (2013, p. 10):



[t]he primary way a researcher can investigate an educational organisation, institution, or process is through the experience of the individual people, the “others” who make up the organisation or carry out the process. Social abstractions like “education” are best understood through the experiences of the individuals whose work and lives are the stuff upon which the abstractions are built...If the researcher’s goal, however, is to understand the meaning people involved in education make of their experience, then interviewing provides a necessary, if not always completely sufficient, avenue of inquiry.

Kvale and Brinkman (2009, p. 3) suggest that an interview “is a conversation that has a structure for purpose.” Interviews are also described as “a conversational partnership” (Rubin & Rubin, as cited in Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 177). I found interviews suitable because, as a researcher, I sought to understand the participants' experiences. Hence, interviews gave me “access to the context of people’s behaviour and thereby a way for [me] to understand the meaning of that behaviour” (Seidman, 2006, p. 10). As the primary data source of this study, a semi-structured, open-ended interview guide enabled me to obtain detailed responses of participants and explore the phenomenon under study in-depth to understand the participant’s perspective (Bogdan & Biklen, 2007), see Appendix A.

Using semi-structured interviews, the DOs shared their insights and provided their reflections through the “open-ended, flexible, exploratory” questions I asked them on the phenomenon of the study (Merriam, 1998, p. 73). The flexibility of the interview guide enabled me to immediately follow up on ideas or issues that arose during the interview and for the co-construction for the DOs and me, developing knowledge of my role as a researcher (Merriam & Tisdell, 2016). Because interviewees generally talk in generalities, probing questions helped me elicit complete information, such as seeking clarity by requesting that the participants elaborate further on their ideas (Creswell, 2012). In that way, I ensured that I gathered as much information as possible to understand the participants’ role in supporting teaching and learning. I audio-recorded the interviews with participants' approval to ensure accuracy (Creswell, 2012). I also took handwritten notes, which enabled me to track key points and highlight ideas of particular interest during the interviews. I conducted interviews in the offices of the participants. The duration of the interviews ranged from one hour to two hours. I conducted two sessions with each participant in one district. In the other district, I could only

do one session with the officials except for the district director, who was available for the second session.

#### ***4.4.3.2 Document reviews***

To supplement semi-structured interviews, I used document reviews as a method of data generation to clarify or corroborate participants' accounts (Creswell & Poth, 2018). Yin (2014, p. 107) supports this assertion by positing that "the use of documents is to corroborate and augment evidence from other sources." Using document reviews assisted in the data analysis to corroborate or contradict interview data. Yin (2014) provides the advantages of using documents. Documents are unobtrusive and not retrospective. They are also specific on the details of the event and are broad, covering a "long span of time, many events, and many settings" (Yin, 2014, p. 106). Documents may include public records, personal papers, visual documents, and physical materials and artefacts (Merriam, 2009; Creswell & Poth, 2018). Based on what emerged during the interviews, I then required these documents to corroborate the interviews. I examined the education district organisational documents, including district policies, district profiles, strategic plans, reports, agendas and minutes of the district management meetings, professional development programmes for teachers and principals. I also reviewed district circulars, agendas, and presentations for district accountability and support sessions with school principals, deputy principals, and Heads of Departments (HODs). Agendas of stakeholders' meetings and memos were also reviewed. I utilised the data from these documents to find links with semi-structured interview data.

#### ***4.4.3.3 Field Observations***

Based on what emerged from the interviews with the DOs, I subsequently arranged for observations of principals' accountability session meetings and support sessions for principals and deputy principals and was able to attend two accountability sessions in one district. As mentioned earlier, the other district director moved, and it was difficult to meet with the current district director. These accountability sessions occurred once a term and were based on all learners' performance across all grades. Patton (2002) argues that observations help the researcher understand the context where people interact and other details that may not present themselves in the interviews. In these sessions, I was a "nonparticipant or observer as a participant... an outsider to the group under study, watching and taking field notes...without

direct involvement with activity or people” by recording activities including descriptions and interpretations of the observations (Creswell & Poth, 2018, p. 168). This ensured that I carefully documented the activities and events in a social context without interfering with the proceedings. Furthermore, while waiting for the participants, I had the opportunity of studying the context and take notes.

#### **4.4.4 Data analysis**

Qualitative case study data analysis is the process of making sense of the data and involves:

“[C]onsolidating, reducing, and interpreting what people have said and what the researcher has seen and read... moving back and forth between concrete bits of data and abstract concepts, between inductive and deductive reasoning” (Merriam, 2009, p. 176). This meant that I “pulled together and organised the voluminous case data into a comprehensive, primary resource package” to locate specific data throughout the analysis process (Patton, 2002, p. 449).

However, Creswell (2012) contends that the data analysis process is not merely a static, linear order of analysis but an iterative practice. Data analysis is a complex process involving both inductive and deductive reasoning (Merriam, 2009). This involved my reviewing and checking the data and abstract concepts and between description and interpretation, which then constituted the study's findings (Merriam, 2009). Stake (1995, p. 71) states that in qualitative research, “there is no particular moment when data analysis begins.” He explains that data analysis “essentially means taking something apart”. In this case, data analysis means understanding the ways DOs use and make sense of their leadership role in supporting schools in teaching and learning and identifying and defining the patterns that emerged from that meaning-making process.

According to Rossman and Rallis (2012), analysing qualitative data is complex; it involves labelling, coding and categorising. It also involves building analytic descriptions, comparing and contrasting, finding patterns, constructing themes and considering alternatives. They further state that data generation is both iterative and sequential and requires “fully knowing the data (immersion), organising these data into chunks (analysis), and bringing meaning to these chunks (interpretation)” (Rossman & Rallis, 2012, p. 262). For this reason, I began by

analysing data following the first interview. This research study followed the process of data analysis as conceptualised by qualitative data methodologists (Creswell, 2009; Merriam, 2009; Miles, Huberman, & Saldaña, 2014).

The first step began by organising and preparing the data for analysis. During this step, I transcribed interviews and listened again to the audio recording, read and reviewed the interview transcripts individually, field notes from observations and documents individually, and made notes, comments, and questions in the margins. I then reviewed my writing in the margins and looked for explicit or implicit references to district leadership understanding of their role as well as their leadership practices. With my research question in mind, I wrote open codes in the margins of each data transcript (Miles et al., 2014). In the second step, I read all the data to reflect on the overall meaning to gain a general sense of the data and thoughts from the participants. Merriam (2009, p. 178) described this qualitative case study analysis stage as “having a conversation with the data,” where the researcher reflectively interacts with the data, asks questions, and makes comments. Thirdly, I began the coding process by following Creswell’s (2009, 2012) procedure of organising the material into segments by taking the text data and segmenting sentences into codes. I labelled the codes with terms based on the actual language from the participants.

Coding is a complex process considered essential to data analysis in qualitative case studies. Saldaña (2013, p. 4) defined code in qualitative research as “a researcher generated construct that symbolises and thus attributes interpreted meaning to each individual datum for later purposes of pattern detection, categorisation, theory building and other analytic processes.” Effective coding maintains a clear focus on the unit of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985), which for this study was a district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning as was perceived by participants. In the fourth step, after working through several pieces of data as described above, following multiple cycles of coding, I then grouped open codes into categories. Throughout this stage of analysis, I was mindful that categories needed to be responsive, comprehensive, sensitising, and conceptually consistent with the purpose of the study (Merriam, 2009). In beginning the analysis, I produced many codes to be further developed; Lincoln and Guba (1985, p. 95) assert that the number of categories should be manageable. These authors suggested that as a researcher, I should consider what is common among codes,

what the reader may deem necessary, unique, and those categories that might reveal areas of inquiry not otherwise recognised.

In the fifth stage, I made interpretations. At this stage, I applied what Miles et al. (2014, p. 261) refer to as:

[M]oving up from the empirical trenches to a more conceptual overview of the landscape. [With this, the researches] are no longer just dealing with observables, but also with unobservables, and are connecting the two with successive layers of inferential glue.

At this stage in data analysis, I drafted a graphic presentation to assist in conceptualising how categories might be related to one another and answer the research question. Patton (2002, pp. 480-481) conceptualise this stage as:

[t]he ongoing challenge, paradox and dilemma of qualitative analysis... it engages us in constantly moving back and forth between the phenomenon of the program and our abstractions of that phenomenon, between the descriptions of what has occurred and our interpretations of those descriptions, between the complexity of reality and our simplifications of those complexities, between the circularities and interdependencies of human activity and our need for linear, ordered statements of cause-effect.

Finally, the qualitative narrative included the description of the themes by weaving the emergent themes into narrative passages so that the findings would logically emerge from the participants' responses (Creswell, 2014). This helped to interpret the meaning of the data.

#### **4.5 Trustworthiness of the research**

Because qualitative case studies focus on particulars rather than generalisations, they cannot be context-free and do not aim at predicting, controlling or judging quality. Consequently, one cannot apply techniques that are positivist orientated. Hence, "applying...constructs, for example, reliability criteria into a qualitative study, are something of a misfit because it is different epistemologically from quantitative studies" (Merriam, 1998, p. 206). In support, Lincoln and Guba (2000, p. 27) contend "the only generalisation is: there is no generalisation"

in qualitative research. Therefore, for this study, I used the work by Lincoln and Guba (1985), which discusses the concept of trustworthiness. Trustworthiness is established when findings reflect the meanings precisely as described by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). For the trustworthiness of this study, I needed a variety of strategies to describe research findings so that they authentically represented the meanings described by the participants (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Creswell & Poth, 2018). The following sections define and explain the strategies used to address the trustworthiness of the study. These include credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To address credibility, I established the degree to which this study's findings represent my participants and not my biases and perspectives (Guba, 1981, p. 80). Creswell (2012, p. 250) considered credibility as:

an attempt to assess the ‘accuracy’ of the findings, as best described by the researcher and the participants, and as a process, a distinct strength of qualitative research in that the account made through extensive time spent in the field, the detailed thick description and the closeness of the researcher to participants in the study all add to the value or accuracy of the study.

I addressed the credibility of this study by using triangulation, member checking, and ongoing peer review (Creswell, 2012). For triangulation, multiple sources of data (interviews, observations, and documents), including the theoretical framework as well as a literature review (as discussed in Chapter 2 and Chapter 3), provided corroborating evidence to illustrate district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. Furthermore, I employed member checking to address the trustworthiness of this study. I took transcriptions of interviews and tentative findings back to the participants for them to check if their views were accurately captured (Merriam, 2009). Lincoln and Guba (1985) consider the member-checking technique as most crucial for establishing credibility. To maximise transferability for this study, I provided thick descriptions of both the setting and the participant profiles. Thick descriptions are “deep, dense, detailed accounts of problematic experiences... Thin descriptions, by contrast, lack detail and simply report facts” (Denzin, 1989, p. 83). Merriam and Tisdell (2016) further posit that providing an adequate description of the context of the research allows readers to assess the similarity of their situations to the study context. I provided thick descriptions by

giving detailed findings well supported by several quotes from interviews, observation field notes, and document data.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) described dependability as whether or not the findings can be replicated, but whether they are consistent with the data collected. An audit trail was the primary dependability technique used in this study. First suggested by Lincoln and Guba (1985) and conceptualised by Merriam (2009, p. 223):

[Audit trail] describes in detail how data were collected, how categories were derived, and how decisions were made throughout the inquiry...through a research journal, (you) write a running record of your interactions with the data as you engage in analysis and interpretation.

Another technique I used to address dependability is a peer review where I discussed the research process with my colleague and the “congruency of findings with the raw data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 229). I also worked with my two supervisors, who contributed to my research process in this regard. This technique helped me to better articulate and build a stronger case for my findings. Furthermore, presenting the findings at the South African Education Research (SAERA) conference and the Commonwealth Council for Educational Administration and Management (CCEAM) conference, where seasoned scholars evaluated my findings, further enhanced my data analysis.

Lastly, the confirmability criterion provided a level of confidence that the research findings emerged from the participants’ accounts (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). I used the audit trail technique to show how the data was collected, categories derived, and decisions were made throughout the study. I kept a research journal to document the process as the research was being undertaken for consistency. Another technique used is reflexivity. I applied this by positioning myself in the study (see Chapter 1) to declare how my background, philosophical stance, and experience influenced the research process of selecting the topic, choosing a methodology, analysing the data, interpreting the findings, and presenting the conclusions. I kept and maintained a journal on all the research experiences throughout my research journey to achieve reflexivity.

#### **4.6 Ethical consideration**

Research ethics provide guidelines on how I, as a researcher, conduct research responsibly. I am obliged to anticipate any ethical issues that may arise during the qualitative research process (Creswell, 2009; Bryman, 2016). Stake (2005, p. 459) supports this assertion by positing that “qualitative researchers are guests in the private spaces of the world. Their manners should be good and their code of ethics strict”. Denzin and Lincoln (2005, p. 70) caution that “because the objects of inquiry in interviewing are human beings, extreme care must be taken to avoid any harm to them.” It was, therefore, mandatory for me to ensure I do not compromise ethical standards. I did that by ensuring that I protected my participants, built trust and promoted the research's integrity. I also guarded against misconduct and any impropriety that might negatively affect district officials and their districts (Creswell, 2009). Ethical considerations refer to protecting the participants' rights, obtaining informed consent and the institutional review process (ethical approval). I obtained ethical clearance for this study from the University of KwaZulu–Natal Ethics Research Committee. The gatekeeper's letter from the Head of Department at DoE of the selected province was sought (See Appendix E). In observing other ethical issues, I complied by implementing the following procedures:

By gaining informed consent, I ensured that my participants were treated fairly and understood the research project as well as their role in the data generation process. I also ensured that participants were aware of my role in the data generation process and the purpose of the study before interviews. Also, I assured my participants of confidentiality and anonymity that their privacy and sensitivity were protected by the use of pseudonyms to identify both the participants and their institution during the development of the study and the dissemination of findings. Furthermore, I informed participants that recorders and transcripts would be stored and locked for safekeeping for five years and, after that, destroyed. As the researcher, I guaranteed participants that their involvement was voluntary and that they would have the freedom to withdraw from the research at any time and without any prejudice to them. I also informed the participants that this research was being undertaken for my PhD study. Participants would receive no incentives to contribute to this study.



## **4.7 Conclusion**

This chapter outlined and described the research design and methodology of this study. This study sought to examine the educational DOs understanding of their role as well as their leadership practices to support teaching and learning in schools within their two districts in a province of SA. Utilising a qualitative case study methodology would provide detailed accounts of the DOs who are members of the DMTs. Qualitative data generation and analysis guided the study. The chapter also explained how the trustworthiness of the study was assured through credibility, transferability, generalisability and confirmability techniques. Ethical issues that guided the study were also discussed. Chapter 4 provides a presentation and discussion of findings for the study.

## **CHAPTER 5**

### **DISTRICT OFFICIALS' UNDERSTANDING OF THE DISTRICT LEADERSHIP ROLE**

*As a district directorate, we have a responsibility at all levels to ensure that there is performance in the system and to ensure that all employees are performing to the expectations and are meeting the mandates of the Department. Whether learner performance improves or drops, it would be because of our actions as a district. (District Director 1)*

#### **5.1 Introduction**

This chapter presents and discusses findings from the data generated in two districts through interviews with the DOs comprising district directors, curriculum sub-directorate DOs and circuit management. It is two-fold. It first outlines the profile of the participants. It then presents and discusses five themes that I identified when I explored the first research question. This study sought to explore the leadership role that DOs play in supporting teaching and learning. As explained in Chapter 1, I conceptualised district leadership role to mean what DOs believed or considered to be their role of supporting teaching and learning as well as DOs behaviours or practices in supporting teaching and learning. The rationale is that what DOs believed to be their role would inform their practice. It is against this backdrop that I constructed the research questions as follows:

1. How do education DOs understand their leadership role of supporting teaching and learning?
2. How do education DOs experience practising their leadership role in seeking to support teaching and learning?
3. What can we learn from the district leadership role that supports teaching and learning?

The findings from the first two questions assisted enabled me to address the last research question, which was to illuminate what could be learned about the district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. Hence, this chapter and the succeeding chapter largely address the first two questions, and the last chapter primarily addresses the last research question. Before presenting and discussing findings, it is necessary that I highlight four issues regarding my findings chapters. Firstly, I decided to have two chapters that reported my findings due to voluminous data. To develop these findings chapters, I made a conscious decision to use my research questions for logical presentation and coherence. I found this

approach to be the best because what transpired in my analysis of data was that the greater part of my data could be grouped according to the research questions. However, there are slight overlaps between the chapters. Secondly, as I discussed in Section 4.4.1, I present and discuss findings collectively across the two districts instead of presenting findings as two different cases. Furthermore, I approached data analysis this way because participants' accounts revealed no significant variations between the two cases. Nonetheless, where there are differences, I highlighted those differences. Thirdly, I chose to use themes that I would include in each of these chapters. However, these themes were not cast in stone but have changed in some aspects as I journeyed through writing up findings chapters. In presenting and discussing findings, I used *verbatim* quotes to ensure that the participants' voices remained foregrounded in data analysis.

The findings, where appropriate, also integrate data generated through documents' reviews and observations. The first part of this chapter outlines the profile of the participants. It is vital that I profile DOs because they held different formal roles and might have different characteristics in terms of demographics. Such differences influenced their understanding of their roles and practices. The five themes of the second part discuss the DOs' conceptualisation of their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. The first theme is District officials' conceptions of quality teaching and learning. The second theme is the Role of developing strategic goals of improving learner performance. The third theme is District strategic planning and communication with principals. The fourth theme is the Provision of support for schools on curriculum-related issues. The last theme is Structural and policy-driven challenges faced by district officials. The third section discusses district leadership practices for supporting teaching and learning. The last part of this chapter is the conclusion.

## **5.2 Profiling the participants**

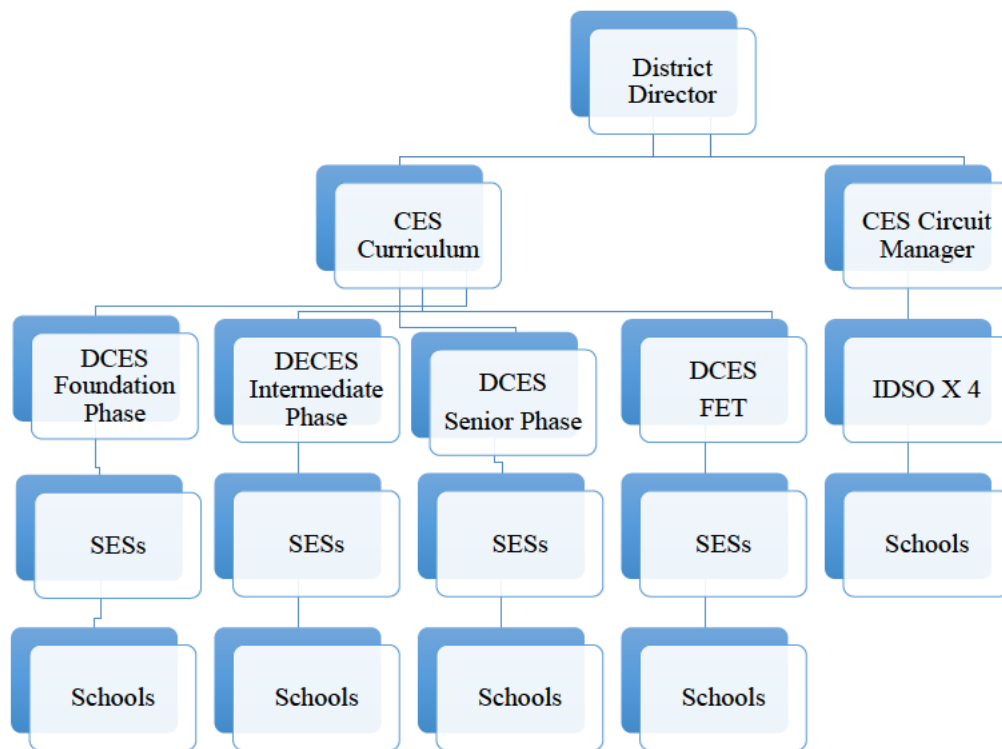
I interviewed eight participants from two education district offices. This group comprised four males and six females who were DOs and members of the DMTs in both districts. Their distribution is shown in Table 5.1 below. All participants have substantial work experience in the selected province, with experience ranging from 20–38 years. What is interesting to note is that all these DOs have substantial experience in the districts they are presently working in. The experience these participants have as DOs ranges from eight to nineteen years. Hence, this would suggest that I might get rich data from participants who had institutional memory.

However, most DOs had at least five years of experience in their current positions. This could mean that these officials have institutional knowledge about their districts.

*Table 5.1: Participants' Profiles*

District	Participant	Designation	Gender	Years of experience in education	Years of experience in the current district	Years in the current position	Age range in years
<b>District 1</b>	<b>DD1</b>	District Director (DD)	M	25	14	6	40s
	<b>CLI 1</b>	Chief Education Specialist (Curriculum and Learning Implementation [CES-CLI])	F	30	14	8	50s
	<b>DCLI 1</b>	Deputy Chief Education Specialist –DCES [CLI (FET)]	M	20	19	5	40s
	<b>CM 1</b>	Circuit Manager (CM)	M	27	18	3	50s
<b>District 2</b>	<b>DD2</b>	DD	F	38	15	6	50s
	<b>CLI 2</b>	CES – CLI	F	25	14	8	40s
	<b>DCLI 2</b>	DCES (CLI) FET	M	38	10	6	50s
	<b>CM 2</b>	Circuit Manager (CM)	F	28	12	2	40s

I now discuss the management structure of the district, as shown in Figure 5.1 below. The District Director is the head of the district. Below the DD are CESs managing eight different sub-directorates: curriculum, circuit management, human resources, finance, education support, and employee relations. This study focuses on district management teams that played a primary role in supporting teaching and learning: the District Director, circuit management, and curriculum sub-directorates.



Key: CES – Chief Education Specialist; DCES-Deputy Chief Education Specialist; IDSO-Institutional Development Support Officer; SES – Senior Education Specialist

*Figure 5.1: Organogram of district officials that support teaching and learning*

Circuit management oversees district sub-structure circuits, which are further divided into four clustered schools, with each IDSO managing each cluster. IDSOs directly manage schools, with CES CM supporting IDSOs as well as school principals. District 1 is divided into four circuits, while District Office 2 is divided into five circuits. Curriculum Directorate, CLI comprises six sections, namely, Foundation Phase [FP] (Grades R – 3), Intermediate Phase [IP] (Grades 4 – 6), Senior Phase [SP] (Grades 7 – 9), FET Phase [FET] (Grades 10 – 12), Examinations section as well as Teacher Development Section. DCESs oversee each of these sections. FP, IP, SP and FET will further have Subject Advisors, also called Facilitators, who supports teachers and Heads of Department (HoDs) on content subject related matters. However, for this study, the focus was on DMT which does not include SESs.

As I explored responses to the first research question, which is what DOs understood as a district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning, four themes emerged. These are learner performance and district vision as means to supporting teaching and learning, quality teaching and learning, communication of district vision in the district and schools, and identifying and providing support schools on curriculum-related issues. Below is the deliberation of each theme.

### 5.3 District officials' conceptions of quality teaching and learning

From the participants' responses, when they shared their understanding of district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning, what came out was the issue of quality teaching and learning. This made me probe participants on how they conceptualise quality teaching and learning. All participants responded with diverse views, including teacher performance, learner performance, content coverage, making learning accessible to all learners irrespective of their socioeconomic background and across all grades. One participant understood quality teaching in relation to quality teaching by teachers who cover the whole curriculum, ensuring that learners are assessed with challenging assessment tasks.

*If we were to measure that there is quality teaching and learning, we would measure that, through the performance of the teachers and learners, quality assessments, you know. Quality teaching by the educators, people who complete the syllabus, and people who set high expectations for their learners. Moreover, when you assess them, you assess them at this level because you are also challenged by the high-level questions. Teachers who can open up that learners are assessed, you know, the category of questioning, from low to higher-order questioning, what you call, Blooms Taxonomy. DD2*

CLI1 concurred and added that while content coverage is important, the content should also be of quality so that learners can contribute to the economy and their careers.

*It means syllabus coverage, coverage of the school-based assessment, quality, not quantity. Quality, I mean in-depth teaching. Content knowledge for the understanding of the content, by the Educators, by the Facilitators, because should an Educator not understand, Facilitator must come in. That is like, quality education for me, across the board, yes...Teachers do not follow the ATP, the Annual Teaching Plan, because it is there, you follow it because you understand and you are saying, if I am following this ATP, it is going to make a difference in the life of this child. If I am doing Accounting, I am doing Accounting; I want to inspire these learners to see themselves tomorrow as Chartered Accountants. And that is the quality that I am talking about. You are not teaching them just to understand debit and credit. To understand debit and credit to say, how is it applicable even in everyday life for the future and all that.*

These two extracts touch on the quality of curriculum delivery and quality assessment by ensuring that all levels of questioning are considered. DD2 elaborated further by stating that quality teaching and learning means that if assessments are standardised, learners perform above the targets that are set by the district. This is what she said;

*If we talk quality of teaching and learning, learners must be achieving the outcomes at every single phase, and they must be assessed through quality assessments, moderated exam papers and if the learners can achieve beyond the targets that are set. If the learners at performance level can achieve above the targets, it means there is a quality of teaching and learning taking place. However, the only time that we can prove that it is quality in the true sense; it is when they are assessed against externally moderated assessments. That is why, when we talk common exams, we truly want to measure quality, because the common exams are not set by individual educators, they are not even moderated. Those are set by the team of identified educators at the provincial level, or they are set by the facilitators at the provincial level. If it is a district paper, by all means, it is set by the facilitator here in the office; teachers are not involved.*

Participant DD1 concurred and further shared how important it was to have competent human resources throughout the district, from teachers in the classrooms to DOs;

*Promoting quality teaching and learning in all our schools means that; I must know exactly what is supposed to happen in the classroom, né, but for a learner to be able to progress. This means that when you employ a CES Curricula, you must employ a competent person. You must have David, who is competent; you must have HoDs that are competent and competent educators, and they will be able to impart, you know. DD1*

DCES1 viewed quality teaching and learning differently by asserting that it is about ensuring that there are equal opportunities for all learners irrespective of their socioeconomic status and race. This is what he had to say: *That each and every learner must have the same opportunity to reach his or her full potential; that is quality teaching and learning. It is not that education must be a class or race issue.* DCES1. Another participant viewed quality teaching and learning as making sure that teachers are in the classroom everyday teaching

*Ensuring that there are teachers in the classroom teaching every day. That is quality. Ensuring that teachers are not only inside the yard, but they are in the classroom teaching. Because some of the teachers, you find they are behind their work. However, when we interrogate the time book, they are present every day, but they are behind, so it means that they are not doing what is expected, they are doing other things at that time. However, schools must be functional, committed learners committed to learning, children, teachers, parents, everyone must be committed. At the end of the day, this will give us the quality of teaching and learning and with our vision.*

CLI2 took a different stance and viewed quality teaching and learning as ensuring that learners are directly involved in their learning, and learners use technology in the classrooms. She said;

*Quality teaching for me is not taking learners for granted. That will also make teaching to reach the peak we want, because what I have noted, we are taking children for granted, and the type of generation we have, you do not take them for granted, tell them what you want. Be open and specific, like give them the rubric, let them know, do not dilly-dally with them. They know what they want, and they will give you. So, the problem that we have, we still want to treat them as if abantwana [children] of the stone age. And that is impacting on your quality. Let us tell them, let us involve them, let us make use also, of the technology that they, you know, they like. The world, life has evolved so much, let us also evolve in education, because it is like, we are still stuck.*

CM1 also highlighted that quality teaching in his district begins in primary schools because they try to avoid blame-shifting between primary and high schools. This is how he expressed this view

*When we talk of quality teaching and learning in this district, it does not start in Grade 12; it starts right from primary school. So, we do not want a situation where people are passing the buck. When we do the accounting session, we realised that there is a lot of passing the buck that is happening. The high schools will blame the primary school teachers, to say, they are giving us learners that are not knowing anything and then the primary schools will say, the high school teachers,*



*we are giving them the good learners and then they are not teaching them well.*

CM1

DOs conceptualised quality teaching and learning by focusing on aspects of teachers, learners, content, and other aspects, such as ICT's role. This is in line with what Elmore conceptualised as an instructional core, as discussed in Chapter 4 (Elmore, 2004; Childress et al., 2007). DOs viewed their role as to ensure that learners are provided with challenging work, that the content is of quality and that teachers are capacitated so that they can deliver the content (Childress et al., 2007; Childress et al., 2006). Honig and Rainey (2015) contend that the extent to which this definition helps DOs depends partly on how DOs use it. What emerged is that; DOs shared a multiplicity of views regarding how they conceptualised quality teaching and learning. While there are these multiplicities, a clear definition of what quality teachers mean for DOs to improve learning outcomes for learners appears to be a prerequisite for supporting teaching and learning.

#### **5.4 Role of developing strategic goals of improving learner performance**

One of the main issues the participants highlighted regarding their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning was their focus on learner performance. Participants believed that learner performance results and district vision were important for them to be able to support schools. This appeared to be the focal point for all participants. For example, DD1 shared his view as follows;

*We see ourselves as playing a key role in supporting teaching and learning. But remember, our premise is that, we will be informed by results, to say, let us look at learner performance, then based on learner performance, then you see how to ensure that we bring the relevant support that will assist us in improving learner performance. So, if we are not there to monitor whether what we have put in place happens, we must be ready for the results.*

DD2 held a similar view and further emphasised the importance of learner performance. This is how she put it;

*Our key role is to achieve excellent performance. Learner performance is our key delivery. This is one of the areas in terms of the whole school evaluation, learner achievement. Education is about learner achievement.*

Sharing the same sentiments, CLI1 further justified the district office approach based on performance results further stating that reading and writing were crucial for assessing learning;

*We are results-driven because the curriculum is basically what the learners are doing in class. Because at the end of the day I want to be sure that the children can read and write. And then, for children to be able to read and write, they have to be assessed, okay. And what is it that is going to show them whether they can be able to read? It is when they are being tested [...], and then the support mainly is based on results. It is very, very important.*

DD1 further elaborated by indicating that languages in primary schools and Mathematics and Science in Grade 9 were fundamental.

*We deal with the basics, basics in school. See, if you look at the primary schools, your reading and language is a basic thing, you know, so we cannot compromise there. So, my team and I have programmes that make sure that in Grade 9 as well, Maths, Science and Languages cannot be a non-starter, you know.*

Quite telling from these DOs' accounts is the sense of responsibility from DOs towards improving learner performance in their respective districts. The DOs' belief is that learner performance is paramount because it helps them understand whether learning is taking place in class. It also came out from almost all the participants that the district role was to achieve excellent results and improve learners' throughput across schools and grades. Sharing similar views, DD1 explained how as a district office, they were able to track learners across grades informed by their approach to supporting schools;

*To a certain extent that we are now seeing for the past three years, we can actually tell you where our learners are, those that were in Grade 8 in 2011, for example, where are they now? Those who were in Grade 10, where are they now? Because to us, it is more about whether we are getting more learners to pass.*

The issue raised from the above quote is that there seems to be an indication of a strong sense of belief about their role in getting more learners to progress across grades. Of interest in this quote is the DOs' involvement in accounting for learner school dropouts. Learning outcomes seemed very important in both districts.

*Remember, whatever that we are doing in the district, the curriculum is the main focus, and all other things are just an additional. CM2*

It would appear that DOs believed that learner achievement was key. This is evident in most participants' articulation of the district goal. For example, DD1 summarised his district goal;

*Our most important goal is to make sure that we improve learner outcomes...anything else can follow, as long as we can make sure that we can measure the performance of our learners...it is to move the schools in this district from poor performing schools — irrespective of their backgrounds — from poor performing schools to greater schools and also to excellent schools.*

Evidently, DOs' role in prioritising learning outcomes by improving the performance of poor-performing schools with the aim of changing them to well-performing schools appears to be critical. While DD2 shared her district's goal, her emphasis appeared to be on ensuring that there were excellent results across all grades: *Our goal is to achieve excellent results, what goes on in the classroom, the output, the throughput must be improved learner performance.* Similarly, CM2 shared the same view: *So, our goal as a district is to make sure that all learners achieve. Because our aim is to ensure that these learners are making it, are passing, you know, and giving us good results.* From these accounts from DOs, there seems to be a consistent shared understanding of the need for DOs to provide schools with direction and guidance. This is evident in the way DOs articulated their district vision. This came out as I posed an interview question, which sought to ascertain the visions of the participating districts. Participants envisioned learner achievement in all grades for all learners. All participants were able to share their district vision. For example, DD1 stated: *Our vision in this district we always preach is, 100% learner performance in our lifetime. In addition, our interpretation is that 100% means every learner has passed across all grades.* CM1 affirmed the district vision: *Our vision has always been, everybody knows here, our vision is, 100%, leave no one behind.* Another participant further indicated that DOs did not just want all learners to pass but also to get quality results. CM2 had a similar view: *Our vision is to make sure that every learner passes, you know.* This is how DCLI1 summarised his district vision and further included an aspect of quality;

*So, our vision is to ensure that all learners pass and then we get quality results. We envision moving away from quantity to quality, so, having more learners given*

*access to the universities... Basically, it is that every child matters and every child must be accommodated in the system to perform at their best, ja.*

These participants' descriptions of their district vision imply that the DOs' role is grounded on their formulation and owning of their vision. Also, this implies that the DOs approach to supporting schools was learner-centred. DOs believed that they were responsible for providing guidance so that schools would understand what was expected of them. The following quotes by DD1 and CM2 support this assertion: *Because I believe that, from where we sit, as district leaders, we need to provide leadership and guidance... without a district, I am telling you, schools will be all over the place, not knowing what to do, you know, DD1.* Sharing similar views, CM2 said;

*Our role is vital, because without the support from us, from us, schools will not be able to know what is expected from them. Especially when we have strategic changes in the system. We need to give schools direction. If, as a district leader, you are lost, then schools will also be lost. If we give clear direction to say, this is how we are going to walk this path; then they will all follow that. Then it needs to be clear; they need to know that this is the vision that we are trying to drive along, then they will follow it.*

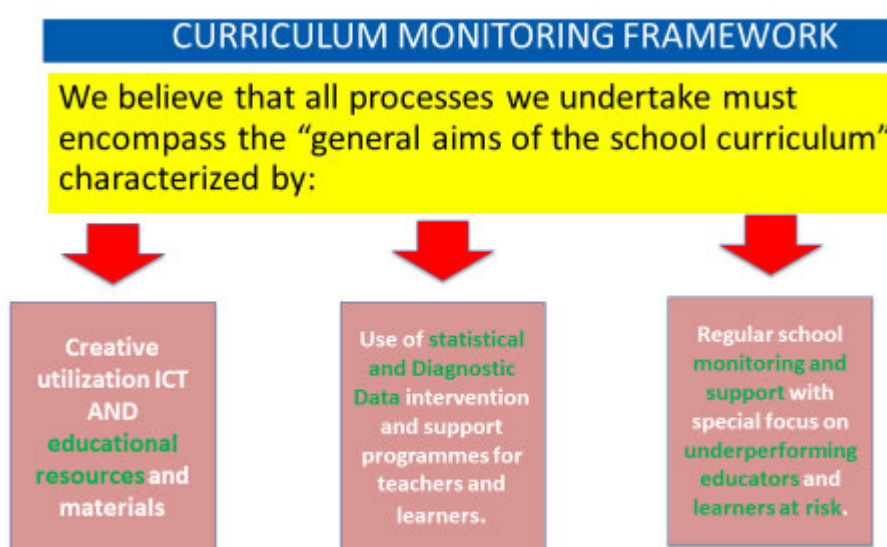
These quotes suggest that schools may lose focus if DOs do not provide guidance and support. Hence, district involvement in the pursuit of achieving the district vision is inevitable. This is how one CLI1 summarised the importance of DOs' involvement;

*Because if schools see us doing what is expected, they will know that, these people, they know what we are doing. But if thina singazi into esiyenzayo sinhlahlatha thina ngokwethu [we do not know what we are doing and we are lost] people can see through us. They can see through us, so, we have an impact ezikoleni [in schools]. How we do things. I have seen how we have turned around performance, because of the decisions that we took as a district who, that, this is what we are going to do. And we have seen a difference.*

It would appear that DOs need to lead by example so that schools could emulate DOs; otherwise, schools may be disoriented. In addition, there seems to be a belief that district leadership influences learner performance improvement. These quotes also seem to show strong belief from the DOs regarding the importance of their leadership role in supporting

teaching and learning. This assertion is consistent with Leithwood and Jantzi (2008) who suggest that individual and collective efficacy could notably link to influencing the improvement of learner achievement. In this instance, DOs held strong beliefs about their role in supporting teaching and learning.

Furthermore, DOs' accounts appear to suggest that their formulation of goals and visions that reflect the performance of all learners across all grades is important. Furthermore, what emerges is the belief in leading by example so that schools may understand the expectations required in order to improve learner performance. Correspondingly, providing direction and support to schools appears as another role for DOs. According to Leithwood et al. (2004, p. 9), providing direction included "creating high performance expectation, monitoring organisational performance, and promoting effective communication throughout the organisation". With these, DOs would help schools to achieve excellent results across all grades and all schools. This finding is consistent with the observation of the meeting I had on the strategic framework for the 2017 school year meeting with school principals. Figure 5.2 below shows the curriculum support strategic framework for District 1.



*Figure 5.2: Power-Point Presentation slide of the district strategic meeting with principals held on 9 February 2017*

The above slide shows how District 1 officials developed their strategy based on their philosophy. District philosophy depicted the use of available resources that included the use of ICT, the use of data for developing intervention programmes for teachers and learners. It also shows how DOs approached their support to schools, which prioritised underperforming

schools. Participants also indicated that another role of the district was to motivate schools to pursue programmes that were designed to improve learner performance. Some participants shared this view. For example, DCLI2 said: *Our leadership role is that; the end of the day, we need to provide guidance in terms of interpretation of policies. Also, it sort of motivate [...] schools to implement intervention programmes and improve learning programmes.* DCLI1 shared a consistent view: *If there are challenges about teaching and learning, as curriculum support, we go in, motivate and support the schools and try and close the gap about teaching and learning.*

While most participants share similar views regarding grounding their approach to supporting schools on performance, two participants had a divergent view. For example, DCLI2 stated that the district leadership role was to ensure that learners become responsible citizens. This is how he responded

*But then also making sure that every child that goes out there, is a citizen that the country can be proud of. I think those are two of the most important ones. We do not want to produce learners that will sit on the street corners and who will mug people, we envision producing learners that go out there, and they add to the...it is to the benefit of the country.*

This quote suggests the importance of foregrounding responsible citizenship and ensuring that learners can contribute to the country's economy by becoming responsible citizens. This assertion somehow shows that learner performance may be important for DOs to evaluate teaching and learning. However, the bigger picture of looking beyond passing the learners to exit the system seemed viable. In addition, some participants' responses also revealed that DOs were positioned to ensure that schools share good practices and enhance quality teaching and learning. For example, this is what DCLI 1 said;

*Our role is to try to get best practices; best practices come from our schools, both ex-Model C and some very good township schools. So, try and take that best practices and share them among all our schools, to see how they can then use them, to enhance teaching and learning. I think coordinating all of the subjects to achieve the goal of the GDE deliver quality teaching and learning to our schools.*

What also seems to emerge from this quote is DOs' leadership role of mediating the sharing of practices between schools to augment teaching and learning. One of the DOs' roles that

emerged from this quote is the coordination of resources in order to realise district goals and vision. What also came out from the participants is that apart from their vision for the district, they also have yearly mottos and slogans that they have in trying to realise their goals.

DD1 indicated that his district's slogan pertained to a classroom being a centre of excellence. This is what he said: *This year, our slogan is simple, making the classroom the centre of excellence because that is where we make things possible.* CM1 confirmed this slogan by saying;

*We need to ensure that the classroom is the centre of excellence. So, by being the centre of excellence, it means that Educators must be in class on time, learners must be in class on time, teaching must be on time, and it must be used effectively and that.*

Most participants in District 2 pronounced their motto, which highlighted working together to reach the targets set for the district. One participant shared *Our motto this year is: Together, we can make it. So, that we can reach the set target of 92%.* Another participant shared a similar belief by sharing how colleagues supported each other;

*When they come up with strategies or programmes that we need to do at the school to support that, we are all there to support. And when there is a problem, we are quick to escalate to the relevant people, the relevant Unit, or a Director that can be able to assist. So, the teamwork that we are having and the work ethic that we are having, I think is the one that is assisting us to can perform well, have programs to say, this is what we are doing, support each other in those programmes.*

Synergy among different sub-structures of the district also came out to be key to ensure that there is a coordination of activities for supporting schools. DOs indicated that working together among themselves as curriculum officials as well as involving other officials helped them do their work of supporting teaching and learning in schools better.

*To bring about synergy, especially within the CLI unit, for instance, or I will be in charge of Mathematics and Physical Sciences where I have all the Maths, no matter whether you are in FET, whether you are in Senior Phase, whether you are Intermediate Phase, we are together [...]. So, we meet every term to discuss strategies, improvements, challenges, and good practices ja. DCLI1*

CLI2 also affirmed that there was teamwork in her district;

*In the CLI unit, what a powerful team we have, the DCEs. It is not about like, me; now I am in this Phase. The other DCEs know what I do. I also know what is happening. We are there for each other; we are there for each... if one falls, we take over. What a powerful team we have. The DCEs in the curriculum, our Director, the DCEs, Circuit managers, we help each other, we carry each other. When one falls, we are there to carry. I will say, there is this man [sic], I do not know. They will quickly work it out and show me; this is it, I have done it this way.*

CM2 shared a similar opinion regarding her role; she further stated that her main role was to identify the needs then communicate to relevant officials who would then intervene. However, she also noted that, as circuit managers, they do come in if, for example, the challenge regards poor school leadership. This is what she had to say;

*The primary role of a circuit is mainly coordination and to ensure that a school is functional. Because we are not experts, but we are positioned in a way that we are able to identify needs in schools. My role is to ensure that those areas of need, if they emerge from the reports of the school, are being addressed. Because if those areas are not addressed, it is going to impact negatively on curriculum delivery. Our role is then to say; this school needs support in the curriculum. Then you communicate through Curricula CES, the needs of the school, né. Then circuits come in to support and develop schools in those areas. So, our role is to read those reports thoroughly and implement the recommendations.*

The above quotes show that synergy among DOs would enhance the district's efforts to support teaching and learning. Open communication among DOs assisted them in ensuring that everybody understood their role for schools to get maximum support. This is inconsistent with Mavuso (2013), who found that principals perceived DOs to be incoherent as they sometimes sent conflicting messages to schools. It is worth noting that; both district directors affirmed that the district leadership role was crucial in that, without district involvement, schools might not perform optimally. What also came out from both district directors was the belief about district directors' responsibility for performance in their respective districts, DD1 said;

*As a district directorate led by myself as a district director, we have a responsibility at all levels to ensure that there is a performance in the system and to ensure that*



*all employees are performing to the expectations and are meeting the mandates of the department. Whether learner performance improves or drops, it would be because of my action as a district.*

Similarly, DD2 shared the same thought;

*Look, the District Director, in fact, working with my management team, is fully accountable as the most senior manager in the district. By virtue of my appointment, I am entrusted with a responsibility to carry the mandate of the department at the highest level of functionality. So, yes, it is correct for me to be held accountable. If the results drop, it questions the way in which I have managed the district. The line function of the department is very clear; it is to discharge my responsibility such that all managers within my district.*

Five issues seem to emerge from the above quotes on the goals of improving learner performance. Firstly, the importance of learner assessment in order to check the achievement of learning outcomes as a leadership role for DOs. Secondly, the importance of assessment to identify the problem and the kind of support to be provided. These findings corroborate Marzano and Waters' (2009, p. 23) study on district leadership, which found that student achievement is the "ultimate and superordinate end product" of the district's improvement efforts. Thirdly, the importance of addressing learner throughput across grades by providing support across all grades comes out as a critical leadership role. Penultimately, the realisation of improvement in terms of academic achievement. Lastly, the overall impression thus far is the central role that DOs play in improving teaching and learning by ensuring that they support the curriculum and learner achievement.

The belief that district leaders are important actors in improving learner achievement is a viewpoint that emerged in the literature review (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017; Childress et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Khosa et al., 2013; Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Rorrer et al., 2008). DOs' accounts seemed to be inconsistent with the literature, which indicates that in SA, district leaders operated primarily as regulating and monitoring compliance instead of seeing themselves as playing a role in supporting teaching and learning (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Mavuso, 2013). Lastly, another striking finding was the sense of responsibility and accountability by district directors on the performance of all learners in their districts. However, involving others in the district management came out as crucial for district directors

to be successful. Marzano and Waters (2009, see also Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008) also posit that when district directors share accountability for performance with principals, learner performance improves and the achievement gap narrows (Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Jantzi, 2008; Marzano & Waters, 2009). The succeeding section elucidates what transpired in the second theme.

### **5.5 District strategic planning and communication with principals**

While sharing their views on DOs' role in supporting teaching and learning, the EDMTs came out as central in planning for the district. While there were similarities in the way these districts carried out their planning, there were slightly different approaches. It emerged from all participants that the EDTM, when planning, conceptualised how they could improve learner performance and then involved the District Management Team [DMT] (DD2). The DMT then involved the district's entire management team before they communicated with all principals and other stakeholders. This is what the DD2 had to say;

*In terms of our business processes as a district, the executive of the district, EDTM conceptualises the thinking. It brings it to the District Management Team, which is bigger than the Executive, comprising eight people to ratify, consolidate and adopt as a strategy. From there, we go to the principals. When we present to all principals, we present it as a strategy that is adopted by the management of the district, but we present it for ratification, further so that the principals can then make their inputs.*

DD1 shared a similar view; however, he indicated that EDTM involved a group of principals in the planning process before the strategic plan was communicated to the entire stakeholders in the district. This DO believe that they involved principals in the planning so that they give inputs. DD1 stated;

*We have what we call consultation processes. As Executive Management Team, we go out on a planning session, we have planned, now are bringing to the next layer of supervisors, District Management Team to say this is the plan. They must know what is it that we are managing. Then from there, then we will invite our principals. Each circuit must give me four principals; we rotate them for a year. How they choose them is up to them. Those principals are going to look at our plan, making*

*inputs. So, every unit, including them, contributed in this, you know. So, each unit has actually participated in terms of ensuring that we come up with a plan.*

DD1 suggested that involving these sixteen principals in the development of the strategy encouraged participation by principals in the implementation of the strategic plan. This is what he said;

*The first principals' meeting, that is where now we unveil the plan. And we will say to principals; when you have got challenges, you have these principals, who have been part of ratifying and refining the strategy. So, you can also use them in terms of support. Then in the first principals' meeting is like the opening of Parliament because they know that they cannot miss that meeting. Because if you miss that meeting, you have missed the whole year.*

This quote seems to give the impression that DOs regarded principals' involvement in district planning. Also, most participants shared that; principals were involved regularly during the year through scheduled meetings. This was done through quarterly meetings with principals. For example, DD2 said;

*In terms of the year plan, we have got four scheduled meetings, where we give a plan of what we are doing in this particular term, at the principals' meeting, and we call for inputs, we adopt, and then we ratify, we certify it as a plan for the term. But then in that meeting, we also give feedback in terms of the term that we will be ending, okay. So, we then give them, how the schools have performed, and what support are we going to put in place to support the schools that have underperformed, in the previous term, in the new term. So, there are meetings to mediate these processes. There are also unplanned meetings that would then be called for a particular purpose, short-term meetings with the principals, and deliver on the plans and get feedback.*

From the above quotes, DOs appeared to ensure that principals owned district endeavours of improving learner performance in schools by having frequent meetings with the principals. Furthermore, the central role taken by the district management gives the impression that it positively affects the way principals viewed DOs' involvement in supporting teaching and learning. Data also revealed that district strategic planning is important to ensure that DOs and all stakeholders in the district understand the vision and targets set for schools. Furthermore,

communicating with all stakeholders so that everybody understands what is expected emerged as important from many participants. As CLI1 put it: *We communicate it to all stakeholders in the district through meetings.* This is how DD2 expounded;

*Now to carry the vision through, we go down to the last person on the ground, the stakeholders, the parents, the learners, our SGBs, our stakeholders with interest in education to share how we are taking the district forward.* DD2

DD2 further stated that meeting with stakeholders every term allowed her to understand the district better;

*In quarterly meetings, is where a report card is being presented; those are meetings of the District Director. No one else speaks at those meetings. The District Director would stand there, present that whole report, even if it means it is about sixty slides. I talk to each of the slides, and it puts you in the position where, as a District Director, you can pronounce your understanding of the districts to the stakeholders. You can also get feedback immediately. It is a two-way type of meeting because after we present, we allow principals to engage.*

Most participants perceived communication as important because everyone understands what is expected. This is what CM1 had to say

*So, they talk to that, to say, and like for example, the curriculum will say, now is the time for the schedules, this is a memo that talks to the whole process...It starts with planning. Ja, it starts with planning. Every term, each Directorate or each Unit will submit their action plan to one person, and then they do an action plan for the district. And then all the dates are there. When you want to check things, you check. There was a training of this and this, did you send your people, your principal? He will say, okay, yes, I did, or I did not, or I forgot or whatever. Then we look at what can be done if you have missed it because this is important. So, there is that communication. We communicate a lot. We communicate; maybe it is one of the strengths of leadership that we do have, that we communicate with the schools, we communicate among ourselves.*

DD1 believed that communication was such that everyone understood what the district stood for because he ensured that communication cuts across the whole district across all levels. He said

*And what I know, I can leave now for two weeks, nobody will say, I do not know what is happening in the district, there is no one. Even the cleaner. They may not know the details, but they will tell you there to say, this is what we stand for in the district.*

Similarly, DCLI1 noted: *Communication is very, very important because that hampers you or stops you from working in your own little, you know, it brings about synergy.* Apart from general meetings led by the DD, CES for curriculum met with principals for both high schools and primary schools. In contrast, DCEs meet with deputy principals and HoDs meet with subject advisors to mediate the intervention. The following quotes illustrate this; we analyse performance against the set targets, then set up interventions to deal with areas of non-performance.

*The CESs and the director are meeting principals, DCEs deputy principals on the first day of reopening. Actually, it is two days, the first day is high schools, and the second day is primary schools. It is happening religiously. And HoDs are met by Subject Advisors. We, as EDMT, we are having meetings with schools, where we meet the principals. CLI1*

The modes of communication participants used to communicate with principals, stakeholders, and DOs were social media and print tools. Most participants indicated that they used to the fact that districts used social media, particularly WhatsApp, to facilitate information sharing and cascade information to all principals. This is what DD1 said;

*We have also established some form of, you know, this technology or WhatsApp communications so that there is a core group of principals. When we send a critical message then they cascade it to the next group, just like so that, at whatever point in time, people have information, you know. Like now, if I can say, I am in a meeting; I will not be available until five o'clock. I only send it to four people then they chain it. In no time, all schools will have received that message.*

DD2 attested to the idea that group chat communication with the principals not only facilitates information sharing but is also a system of supporting each other.

*We have an open discussion, an open WhatsApping line of communication with the principals, all principals in my district, and have systems for urgent communication. With WhatsApp, we post memos; so, the information goes very, very fast. We have got a group chat of communication with the principals. We chat frequently, and we sharpen one another, we track, we also give support, you know.*

CLI2 shared a similar view regarding the use of WhatsApp communication and further indicated that when there was a need for urgency, they would have a meeting using WhatsApp group communication in real-time.

*We also have, like, chat groups. Like when they need information, we communicate on a daily basis; they have my email and so on. So, I have a direct impact. These chat groups, it really helps because we can deal with an issue and finish it in a chat group instead of meeting face-to-face. CLI2*

From the above quotes, DOs use of different modes of social media as a way of real-time communication with principals is an interesting finding. Social media's use seemed to have allowed for the development of engagement and communication despite physical distances between district offices and schools. Apart from using social media, participants had a similar understanding regarding the tools and memos to facilitate communication with principals. Some participants shared how the use of monitoring tools as a way of communicating with schools assisted DOs to have a common understanding and to be able to communicate among themselves when they give feedback in their management meetings. For example, CLI1 said that when visiting schools, DOs had tools that they adapted depending on the objective of the visit. This is how she expressed her view;

*When we go to schools, we are using tools, and we are adapting them per term, depending on what is it that we want to achieve. If we are saying - especially in the lower classes, our emphasis is on reading, then obviously you are going to adapt the tool, based on that... Obviously, from the tools, the tools are indicating to us, if ever, whatever, because I say we do not get into the class. But getting learners books and it is very important. If you look at our tools, our tools have sections where we are writing the names of learners so that we are not giving the same learners.*

DD1 shared this view on how tools were used to give feedback among the DMT members.

*We have teams, the School Support Teams, it is a multi-pronged team, these teams will go out with a tool and they go and monitor what is happening. Then there is a team that analyses those instruments. And then at a management meeting, that CES who's responsible for will come and present, to say, this is what we are identifying from this particular area. Therefore, we will need either more resources or we will need to change the strategy and all those things.*

While the use of these tools helped DOs communicate with principals and among themselves as officials, participants also highlighted the importance of giving regular feedback to all stakeholders on the district's performance. DD2 said;

*Every quarter, we give our stakeholders a quarterly report card because they are the ones who have an interest because they are the ones who can unblock issues of education challenges on the ground. Our stakeholders include our SGBs, our structures with interesting education. In the report card, we give them the status of education in the district, and every term, we give them the plans for the new term. So that is being done every term throughout the year.*

What seems to transpire from this theme is that DOs believed that their role was to develop different strategies to communicate with school principals, school personnel, and all stakeholders. DOs' involvement of principals through regular meetings corroborates the studies by Johnson and Chrispeels (2010; see also Honig, 2012). These studies found that DOs' engagement with principals enhanced principals' leadership for teaching and learning as well as increased a sense of agency among principals. The Policy on the roles and responsibilities of DOs further affirms that the DOs' role is to work collaboratively with principals; this, in turn, helps schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching (RSA, 2013). Interestingly, it emerged that DOs believed in the use of social media to facilitate information sharing among DOs and between themselves and schools. This supports the research that suggests that social media provides school district leaders with many possibilities to share their district's endeavours to support teaching and regularly learning with stakeholders (Cox, 2012). The importance of giving regular feedback on the performance of the district came out as an interesting finding. This shows how DOs' involvement in monitoring teaching and learning could enhance the involvement of all stakeholders in the school communities. These findings

are consistent with previous research. Literature indicated that when educational leaders involve stakeholders, they proactively build and maintain healthy relationships with parents and the community (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Myende, 2018). The following theme is the provision of support for schools on curriculum-related issues.

## **5.6 Provision of support for schools on curriculum-related issues**

Turning now to the theme: Identifying curriculum-related gaps. When I asked DOs the strategies they used to realise targets that they put in place, participants' responses showed that curriculum coverage was non-negotiable. DOs also indicated that they work with schools from the beginning of the year in planning for monitoring content coverage and assessment tasks. This is what DD2 said;

*So, mainly the strategy involves ensuring that no learner writes any exams or assessments, having not completed the syllabus, within the time frame that the syllabus is allocated. Having not done the school base assessments, that is a key delivery. Then we are saying, do not compromise contact time. That contact time has syllabus completion, has SBA; you cannot tamper with that.*

Consistent with DD2, DD1 emphasised that he monitored curriculum coverage through strict monitoring. He stated: *I am making sure that there is, you know, stringent monitoring of curriculum coverage; anything else can happen, but curriculum coverage is not compromised.* It also emerged that monitoring is done by verifying curriculum coverage every term with the HoDs. However, schools are given plans as to how monitoring will be done at the beginning of the term. This is how CL2 explained;

*The way that we managed to see what is going inside the school, is curriculum verification, whereby all the schools are given, every first week of the term, when the schools reopen, we like, in term two, the first week, we are going to verify the coverage for term one, for all the schools. The HoDs will moderate each other in the presence of the subject advisor.*

This passage suggests that the district role in ensuring that curriculum coverage is mandatory. Also, there is some indication that DOs should ensure that assessment tasks are administered. Ensuring that teachers respected contact time through monitoring regularly came out as important. What is coming out from these quotes is the importance of monitoring content



coverage by DOs. While most participants shared consistent views regarding this, some participants raised the concern that teachers focus on meeting deadlines as per the district plan while not focusing on the depth of the content. This is how CLI2 expressed this view;

*We have noted that each time we have external assessments, the district takes a dive. Our results go down. Meaning, the quality. So, now we are looking at the issue of quality. Quantity-wise, they know now that when we come, we count, we count the activities. For this particular concept, approximately how many activities did you do informally and then how many did you do formally. That we have done, we have achieved as a district. But now we are still struggling with the issue of quality. Ja, the quality, meaning the depth, going into depth into teaching concepts. That is still what we are working on. What we want to achieve as a district.*

This concern was also shared by DCLI1 and CM1, who indicated that content coverage could sometimes be problematic because teachers tended to focus on finishing the content at the expense of ensuring that learners understand the concept. This is how they put it;

*Because like I have said, a teacher will introduce maybe, a concept, for example, addition. And then, learners will do just one activity and then move to subtraction. There is no depth there. There is nothing. So, we worked on ensuring that there are some activities that are done to ensure that the learners understand the concepts in depth. DCLI1*

CM1 had a similar point of view and further explained his view;

*Running with the syllabus, it does not help if the learners are way backwards; while the learners are there, there is a gap in between. You are running alone; you are finishing the syllabus; you are ninety-nine per cent finished the syllabus, but the learners are at fifty-five per cent. You cannot run alone; you must have the learners comprehending what you are saying to them.*

These quotes appear to suggest that while there are systems DOs used to monitor curriculum coverage, paradoxically, DOs also viewed completing syllabus as problematic because some learners would not have understood some of the content. In that way, there could be a compromise in quality teaching and learning. While the issue of quality seems to concern participants, CM2 gave some indication of how DOs attempt to address the issue of quality.

She stated that they advise schools to look at the content in-depth in order to understand what real challenges were;

*And the other support structure or the intervention that the curriculum unit is doing to ensure that learners do pass is that they work with HoDs to develop their own intervention programs at a school level. They look at the subjects that are more challenging, and then we say to them, whenever you check, check what is the real problem; if maybe learners have failed Maths, what is the real problem in Maths, is it because of the Trigonometry or is it because of the Geometry.*

Another participant (CLI1) reported that this has worked because teachers begin to realise that they need to work collectively as teams to understand content gaps and develop integrated support plans. CLI1 gave an account of how collaborative moderation by DOs helped DOs to have a broader view of challenges that resulted in poor performance. She elaborated by giving an example;

*And then when I meet the DCES, Subject Advisors, I tell them, to say, out of the 180 schools, from the Primary Schools, these are the schools that have underperformed, these are the schools that have underperformed in FET and so, on. And then, they have underperformed because of these subjects. And then, from these subjects, we have found that there are questions, where you find that teachers, you know, let us say, maybe Question 5, as an example, you find that all learners did not answer it, then you can see that it is a problem with the teacher, it is not a problem of the learner. So, in terms of coming in, we try to capacitate subject advisors; they go out to do content training*

This quote suggests that the district leadership role in offering content training to teachers is important to enhance teaching and learning. Also, collaboration among DOs in ascertaining curriculum-related challenges appeared to be vital. DCLI1 exemplify this view;

*I and the Senior Phase Coordinator, same level as mine, but she is Senior Phase, we work very close together. As I said, if you go to my office – it is not something that I am just saying - you will see the FET there is there, and Senior Phase is there because we want to see how is it that the learners that lands up in Grade 10 next year, how well did they pass. Also, we want to see that when we say that we have a problem in Grade 10 Accounting, what is it that is causing the problem. Is it*

*because in Grade 9 – remember in Grade 9 you have that EMS [Economics and Management Sciences] and where one part is Accounting, and another part, Business Studies– are the schools focusing more on the Business Studies and neglecting the Accounting part. When the learners come to Grade 10, then they have that gap to catch up with, you see.*

From this quote, collaboration among DOs may assist in understanding, in a broad view, challenges that may emanate from curriculum-related challenges, such as transition across phases, which results in the change of content subjects. Turning now to another challenge that participants felt hindered their efforts to enhance teaching and learning. For some participants, Mathematics and Physical Science appeared to be a challenge; hence DOs prioritised these subjects. DD2 shared her views: *The subjects that are still giving me problems in my district is Maths, Physical Science and Accounting. So, in our framework, we always prioritise these three subjects. We’ always!* DD2. DCLI1 concurred: *We have challenges in subjects like Physical Sciences and Maths. Then see how we can start closing the gap in relation to improving the quality of teaching and learning in those specific areas.*

Quite telling in these quotes is the DOs’ challenges to support and improve Mathematics, Physical Science, and to some extent, Accounting. This is consistent with the general impression of DOs perceptions about the challenge they experience concerning balancing content coverage with quality teaching and learning. It appears that while this seems a challenge, participants endeavoured to prioritise these three subjects in their quest to improve teaching and learning district-wide. In this theme, DOs shared similar views regarding their role of providing support on curriculum-related matters. Participants believed that their role was to ensure that teachers understood that curriculum coverage was non-negotiable. It emerged that planning and monitoring were done at the beginning of the year. With curriculum coverage, assessment seemed like a way of ensuring that content coverage was adhered to. Even though there was a general agreement on the importance of ensuring that there was a monitoring of content coverage and assessment activities, DOs acknowledged that there was still a challenge of enhancing quality. Participants believed that teachers would cover the content, while other learners had not grasped the content. However, this did not deter them from ensuring that learners succeeded. What seems to be of interest is their conceptualisation of supporting teaching and learning. The belief that merely focusing on content coverage and the number of assessment tasks appears to be a technical way of supporting teaching and

learning while the context of teaching and learning is complex and unpredictable with constant changes (Honig & Rainey, 2015). The following section of this chapter moves presents and discusses the structural and policy-driven challenges DOs face.

### **5.7. Structural and policy-driven challenges faced by district officials**

As participants shared their views on their leadership role, DOs raised some contextual challenges that they believed militated against the effective discharging of their duties. These challenges are a result of policies as well as demands outside district jurisdiction. They included the capacity of DOs, principals, SMTs and teachers. Another challenge that participants experienced as challenging was the synergy across all levels in education. These challenges are elaborated on below.

#### **5.7.1. Insufficient capacity in principals, SGBs, teachers, and district officials**

Even though DOs viewed themselves as playing a crucial role in supporting teaching and learning in schools, they maintained that principals, SGBs, teachers were key in ensuring that they realise district goals of improving learning outcomes. However, they shared concerns regarding the leadership capacity of principals. Referring to the important role of principals, one DO noted: *Performance of schools, remember it starts from the appointment of principal, unfortunately, CM2*. Other participants corroborated on the same view: *We can do anything, but if we do not have the right principal in the school... So, it borders around management. If we can have strong managers, then there should not be problems. DD1*.

*The quality of leadership and management by principals, by the entire SMT, really impacts negatively on any school's core business, which is teaching and learning. You know...the rise and the fall of schools rest entirely on the shoulders of principals. For any school that does not have good leadership, a good strong team of the school management team, that school does not function to reach its set targets. Because instead of that school putting in place systems to monitor curriculum delivery and all factors that positively and negatively impact the day-to-day teaching and learning in the school. They are spending time on conflict. They are spending time on monies that are misused for whatever reasons that cannot be accounted for. DD2*

District directors attributed poor leadership by principals to a lack of accountability systems on managing principals' performance. One DD said: *And I have been saying it, to say, up until we have principals signing a performance contract, we are not going to win* DD1. Similarly, DD2 share a similar view on the accountability of principals. She said: *They lack accountability, they lack managing timelines, delivering on targets that are set for those. Yes, we deal with that because those are the schools that we categorise for specialised interventions. We continue to support them.* One participant shared her view on how principals' poor leadership impacted DOs day-to-day operations. CLI2 said;

*Poor leadership by some principals is a challenge. We end up attending to a crisis that can be avoided...It becomes too heavy for me as a manager now, because I do not know where to touch, it is burning there, once we are far away, fifty kilometres away, you are told another place is burning, while we have school managers who are supposed to manage the situations.*

Participants also shared their views on principals not wanting to make unpopular decisions and, consequently, requesting DOs to intervene. DD2 shared his recent account of one principal who failed to make a decision when one HoD decided to leave for the external examination marking while that HoD had not met obligations of finishing the work first before leaving. That principal reported the matter to the district office. He explained

*I will report you to the district; to do what. They do not want to be seen to be the ones that are taking that difficult decision. I have got one DCES; he is sitting with schools that have not submitted marks, you know. When I asked the principal, why? No, the HoD decided to go to the marking centre. But I said, you signed that thing, you allowed that person to go to the marking centre.*

Similarly, CLI2 shared her experience

*Like when you go to schools, you will find SMTs say, can you please attend that teacher, and so on and so on. Trying to pass the buck, and what they must do, they are not doing, but they want us to do it for them. And thina [us] we are not there for that.*

The above accounts on school managers' insufficient capacity suggest a need for principals' capacity building on taking hard decisions. Also, one DO believed that lack of capacity by

principals was a result of the recruitment processes of principals. DD1 believed that the responsibility of appointments to be done by the School Governing Bodies posed a challenge. This is what he said;

*You see, there is a perception in some areas that says the whole idea of having SGBs to be instrumental in the appointment of principals is a big challenge, you know. And I am not taking anything away from them, but if you do not have the right leader, you must forget. In this district, I can tell you that if there is an issue, it would always be around posts. And that is an element of destabilising everything, you know. So, those that must assist us in appointing the right people for the right job. We are not getting the right people to do that, so that is negative.*

From this quote, School Governing Bodies (SGBs) seemed to sometimes lack expertise in making appointments for principals. DD2 further indicated that SGBs involvement in school governance resulted in conflicts. They shared their views;

*Conflict in schools impacts negatively. I do have schools where the principal was sitting in the SGB, has a conflict with the Chairperson of the SGB, you know, and have to spend hours trying to resolve the crisis. That is good quality time that they should be used to account on teaching and learning. So, those factors impact negatively. DD2*

While SGB involvement seemed a challenge in both participating districts, it did not stop DOs to try to address this challenge. DD1's quote exemplifies how DOs communicated with SGBs and principals, underscoring the importance of prioritising curriculum when there are SGB meetings;

*We emphasise with our SGBs and principals that they must have standing agenda items on their meetings when there are parents meetings, items including curriculum issues, learner performance so that parents can be informed so that they can know and know the expectations. They must know, when we speak about issues, they must understand them. But our Governing Bodies do not, for now, understand their role, you know. For them, it is all about money and nothing else. The curriculum is not at the centre of the discussions. But I always say, Governing Bodies, the first agenda item in their meeting, must be curricula, you know. And those things do not happen, you know.*

It also came out that lack of teacher capacity could also be a factor that hindered DOs attempts to support teaching and learning. As a result, DOs' believe that their role is to ascertain and discover the gap in terms of teacher capacity to teach the content.

*Because we need to look maybe, out of the three teachers, maybe there is this one who is pulling the whole grade or the whole subject down. So, we need to look at, who is it? What is it? What is the challenge? So, sometimes you will pick up that maybe, maybe it is the teacher. The concept, maybe she is not like, good in the concept, then she will do 'touch and go.' You just introduce the concept then you move on. So, we engage in such issues and then make recommendations, and then we will do a follow-up. When the next time comes also, and during school visits, we interact to say, what are you doing concerning the issues that we raised during the data conversation? Yes. CLI2*

However, a concern was on the imbalances in learning outcomes, which were attributed to teacher performance. DD2 shared her view;

*Some teachers are not reaching the learners as best as they are supposed to. You have, in this district, our Maths and Science are at 50%, and there is a teacher every day in the classroom. And for me, there are pockets of teachers that are producing 80% and above. In the same breath, an educator can hardly produce 20%, and it is the same Maths and Science educator in another school in the same area. So, teachers sometimes do contribute negatively to achieving the targets, though we do have programs to support.*

While there was a general concern on poor leadership and management by some principals and teachers, district directors DOs' lack of capacity, which at times hindered the strategies they put in place to support schools, DD2 said: *The capacity of officials in the district sometimes does fail our strategies on the ground.* Similarly, DD1 claimed;

*It cannot be the principal alone. Where is the supervisor, where is the circuit manager? Where was your strategy to say; I can account that these schools have been supported, they know what to deliver on? So that is lacking. That is lacking; it is not there. Ja, in the district, there are those people who will not be comfortable to keep taking certain decisions. And they allow things to flow even things are not correct, you know.*

This theme suggests that the lack of capacity of principals, SMTs, teachers, and DOs could hinder DOs endeavours from supporting teaching and learning. DOs also believed that policies of recruitment of principals were a result of this challenge.

#### **5.7.2. Misalignment between district and head office and within the district offices as structural challenges**

Participants shared their differing views on structural challenges that may impact their role in supporting teaching and learning in schools. The synergy between the provincial head office and district offices appeared to be a cause for concern. Moreover, within the districts, there seemed to be a challenge on how curriculum (CLI) and circuit management aligned their work of supporting schools. It also appeared that due to the restructuring of the districts, there were anomalies in the work districts organised to support schools. DD1 shared his view on the challenge of district and head office structural challenges. He believed that the alignment of structure between the districts and head office levels was inevitable. He noted that this misalignment of both levels resulted in competing priorities. This is how he shared his view;

*There are also competing priorities, you know. We do not even have time; there are meetings; there is this. So, as a department, we are saying we needed to review our calendar of activities. Because of what you find at Head Office, let me give you an example. At Head Office, you will have somebody responsible for governance only; somebody is for management. But the district, that is not the case. So, if that person decides to call a meeting and other management people decide to call a meeting, so everybody, at the end of the day, will be calling meetings, and everybody in the district will be all over. As a result, we do not have enough time to support our schools, you see. If we mirror the Head Office's work, we would be able to deploy the resources accordingly.*

One DOs shared her frustrations on how the Head Office administrators would sometimes require the same information, resulting in DOs having to waste time instead of focusing on their functions of supporting schools. CLI2 noted;

*Another thing that is also impacting negatively on our daily operations, it is like they are not talking. This one will want this same information, but three departments want it in different templates. Now you work on changing to different*



*templates, one and the same, instead of taking this one thing that we have and work on it. This one wants it this way, and this one wants it that way.*

Not only was the challenge of alignment between the district and the head office, but the synergy between the national structure and the provincial head office also came out as another challenge. It appeared that this anomaly created confusion in the district because of the demands from both levels. This is what DD1 said;

*Sometimes there is this competition, be caught between the strategy of the province and the strategy of DBE, which takes priority, you know. The alignment of those things, you know. Somewhere we do not have to compete. DBE is expecting this; the province will be expecting this, and they all want us. So, we needed to find a way of saying, how do we synergise some of this, so that we know that this is what we are aiming for, you know.*

Synergy within the district office also came out as a challenge that hindered the operations of supporting schools. Seemingly, there was disharmony in the way the CLI unit and the circuit management unit worked. This appeared to be affecting the curriculum support (CLI) sub-directorate. This is how one participant shared his view;

*IDSOs, I think mainly in some districts, it is a problem that there is no synergy between circuit management and CLI. There are challenges that we experience. For instance, there are administrative problems. You have HoDs that are not doing their jobs, but sometimes, you see the teachers do not take the facilitators very, very serious; principals do not take facilitators very seriously. But if the IDS can come in and support us, I think it will solve many problems where they can help us and support us to close those gaps. DCLI1*

It appeared that DOs did not accept the introduction of the circuit as a substructure of the district. This structural change resulted in upsetting the *modus operandi* of supporting schools. Participants believed that it was better when there were no circuits in the district because support could be distributed across without hindrances. CLI2 summarised just how the restructuring of the districts hampered their process of supporting schools.

*I must say, it came as a big challenge for me. From 2012, our province introduced restructuring and come up with a circuit way, we did not work in circuits, but now*

*we have circuits. In our district, we have five circuits, and in the five circuits, there is a Circuit Manager with three IDSOs. When the restructuring came, I am alone at CLI, and they took subject advisors and spread them into this circuit, which makes life now not so easy. Now I am in a situation whereby Circuit Manager wants to do something with the circuit, with the circuit team. Mina [I] now, I have a whole calendar full of activities from Head Office, issues that we have seen during the year, a whole program that I must also implement. Circuit wants their people; I also want them. Now there is this clash that is going on. So, now coordinating activities, it is a big deal for me. Sometimes I would say, we have management plans to say, okay, fortnightly they will go to the circuit on a Friday. However, sometimes we find the circuit wants them on that week; then, I cannot see them. So, also, it is an issue of ukuthi [that], how do we coordinate. But we try. We are still trying. And who is suffering? The school. The school suffers and, most of all, the child.*

A similar view was shared by DCLI2, who shared his experience on how restructuring into circuits resulted in CLI official not to able to attend some meetings because of clashes:

*But unfortunately, the problem is, there are now five circuits. Now they will have their circuit meetings in the week, maybe on Tuesday or Wednesday and I cannot be at every meeting, and so that is the challenge. And previously, it was different, there was only one Coordinator for all the IDSOs, and he will call one meeting, where I can also be, or my senior can be as well. Now that is a challenge DCLI2*

Another participant highlighted that district restructuring into circuits made it difficult for DOs to share practices across all schools in the districts. From her account, it appeared that the introduction of circuits implicitly clustered schools according to socioeconomic status. As a result, it impacted negatively on collaboration across schools. CLI1 expressed her view;

*With subject information-sharing meetings that I spoke about earlier, we would mix educators because we want people to share good practice. Because good practice does not only come from us, it comes from schools also ...Now, unfortunately, this modelling now the white [urban school] teachers now are on their own. And sometimes our underperforming schools - and traditionally it will be our black schools - you find that you know, somewhere you need this expertise. You are not*

*able to have it because now, you know, schools are grouped into circuits... But because Head Office wants us to report per circuit, you know, we are forced. CLII*

Few participants also shared structural challenges the district faced, which were based on IDSOs unhappiness about their role in the district. This hampered the day-to-day work of supporting schools. They mentioned that policy changes were the cause of this challenge. This is how DD1 and DD2 shared their views;

*And also, you know, the issue of the Cluster Leaders in this province, where there is still resistance by the Cluster Leaders, to say they should have been called Circuit Managers and not Cluster Leaders. These IDSO currently are fighting for the term, Circuit Manager. Now they decided, some of them, to withdraw their services, up until this matter is addressed, you see. But now, while doing that, they are not servicing schools the way they are supposed to.*

*There are tensions in the GDE regarding the post of IDSOs wanting to be Circuit Managers, we sort of lost some IDSOs. We feel that we cannot continue to be caught in issues that are policy; the issue of IDSO Circuit Managers is a policy matter, and it has been dealt with. So, for me, that is a limitation. Because IDSO's are at the chalk face of the school, almost on a daily basis.*

From the above quotes, there seems to be a challenge for DOs in coordinating support activities for schools because of the circuit restructuring that has been introduced. This is contradictory to the assertions that DOs made previously in this chapter, where DOs shared their experiences on how they work together to synergise their leadership roles, see page 32. Furthermore, from the above excerpts, it appears that national policies could hinder DOs while attempting to support teaching and learning in schools. While national policies are imposed on district officials, DOs need to manage the environment so that it does not impact much on their daily operations. This explains what open systems theory and PELP Coherence Framework postulate as important (Childress et al., 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Scott, 2003)

## **5.8. Conclusion**

Overall, it emerged in this chapter that DOs shared similar beliefs that their role was to improve learner performance and to develop a district vision for teaching and learning. The overarching finding is that; DOs had a shared philosophy regarding their role. What emerged prominently

is that district leadership's key role is improving learner performance. This led to another finding, which is DOs' belief in developing goals and vision that foreground the improvement of learner performance across all grades. The finding that the district leadership key role is to provide direction and guidance to schools came up. Furthermore, coordination within the district also emerged as crucial to synergise the activities to support schools. Another notable finding that emerged was the district directors' strong belief about their responsibility for learner performance in their districts. DOs believed that SMT and teachers would not have direction and guidance without their involvement. They also believed that through their involvement, they could narrow achievement gaps. They further believed that they are accountable for learner performance in the district. DOs' understanding alone makes up only part of the full picture of participants' role in supporting teaching and learning. What is of interest is whether their beliefs regarding their role, as discussed in this chapter, is consistent with their leadership practices. The succeeding chapter addresses this by deliberating on the findings from the district leadership practices that support teaching and learning.

## CHAPTER 6

### DISTRICT LEADERSHIP PRACTICES

*To carry the vision through, to carry the strategic frameworks of the districts, we to go down to the last person on the ground, the stakeholders, you know, to share how we are taking the district forward...Look, the mandate of education is that education processes must be grounded in the communities. So, that is why I have quarterly meetings with the structures on the ground. Our stakeholders, our SGBs, our structures with interest in education...it is done in every term throughout the year. Everybody is involved in making it possible that we achieve targets that we set...the systems that we put in place are systems that speak to accountability. (DD 2)*

#### 6.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, I presented and discussed the findings on how DOs understood their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. As explained in Chapter 5, this is the second chapter of presenting and discussing findings that address the second research question: How do education DOs experience practising their leadership role in seeking to support teaching and learning? In addressing this research question, seven major themes emerged. These are: DOs' use of support systems as enablers to support teaching and learning, support systems as enablers, enacting differentiated approach to supporting schools, DOs' visibility in schools, garnering support through community-district partnerships, use of accountability and support sessions, and providing professional development for teachers, SMTs, principals. Below I discuss each theme in that order.

#### 6.2 Using school data to support teaching and learning

As participants were giving accounts on their role in supporting teaching and learning in schools, all indicated that they relied on data from schools. After analysing that data, they use it to support the schools. DOs believed that basing their decisions on data helped them to make informed decisions in the way they would support schools. They believed that data use enabled them to provide differentiated support for schools. DD1 described how data help them when visiting schools;

*No official in this district will leave the district going to a school not knowing what support schools need. You go there because you know that this school is requiring support in this area. So, when you go there, you are not going there to say, how can*

*I help? You are saying, from your report, this is where you said you need help, and this is the type of help that I am bringing.*

From this quote, data-informed leadership practice seems vital for DOs when supporting schools. Using data enables DOs to know where and how to give support. This then helps them to visit schools knowing what type of support they could provide. For them to use data, all DOs indicated that the use of data management system, Data-Driven Dashboard (DDD), others use the term; DBE dashboard was beneficial. They believed that, with DDD, they were able to view and use data across all levels in the system. This is how DD2 elicited how dashboard was useful;

*Every month, schools are reporting on attendance by both learners and educators. All schools can capture the statistics at their school, the statistics in terms of learner performance. So, I am able, while in the district, to go through the DBE dashboard and actually pick up the schools, where there are issues of challenges in terms of Whole School Evaluation (WSE) nine focus areas so that we can then begin developing a specific strategy for this particular school.*

This is consistent with CLI1;

*With the dashboard, you can immediately sort of sort the schools, and you can see who's having the best pass rate, and you can rate them from the poorest to the best, per subject. But you can also have other information, like learner attendance. You can immediately see the schools that need attention. Even the subjects, so you can see there are five red subjects, the rest of them are maybe amber and even green. So, you know those five must get attention, ja.*

Quite significant in these responses is the role data plays in making decisions about the support that DOs could provide to schools. The quotes also show how using the data management system could facilitate a broader understanding of learner performance and related information without physically visiting schools. Using a data-based technology system seemed to have enhanced the accessibility and timeliness of data. It also facilitated communication among district officials and between district officials and schools. Seemingly, data-based decision-making is crucial because it gives a broader view of factors including learner performance, learner absenteeism, learner achievement, content coverage, and WSE that can influence teaching and learning. This practice resonates with what DOs believed to be their role in

improving learner performance. This shows that DOs use learner statistics for them to be able to understand learner performance gaps so that they intervene. Figure 6.1 below is the document I got from District Office 1 that shows DDD on the focus areas of WSE. It clearly shows how DDD used colours green, amber, and green. This document shows how DOs use DDD to capture information of schools' focus areas of WSE.

Schools	Profile period	Basic Functionality	Leadership, Management and Comm	Governance and relations	Quality of Teaching and Learning & TD	Curr Provisioning and Resources	Learner Achievement	Sch Safety, Security and Discipline	School Infrastructure	Parents and Community
Sibalo PS	Initial	4	4	4	11	6	4	4	2	2
	term 1	6,4	6,6	5,18	16,64	6,55	3,47	6,2	3,06	3,52
	term2									
	term3									
	term4									
Ramabolo PS NO 1	Initial	4	4	4	11	6	4	4	2	3
	term 1	8,58	9,52	6,82	11,84	12,8	5,83	7,49	4,84	4,13
	term2	8,16	9,33	6,45	17,17	11,33	5,3	6,15	4,83	4,04
	term3	8,25	9,4	6,4	17,1	11,5	5,3	6,15	4,8	4
	term4									
33 UNDERPERFORMING SCHOOLS										

Figure 6.1: dashboard information extracted from District Office 1 DDD documents

The purpose of WSE is to evaluate the overall effectiveness of a school, the support provided by the District office to schools, how the school is being managed, the school's infrastructure and learning resources, as well as the quality of teaching and learning at the school (RSA, 2001). As the above document highlights, there are nine areas to which each school evaluates itself and by the DOs. From the above document, Sibalo Primary School's [pseudonym] performance shows that the school is in the red and required more support from the district in all performance areas. Ramabolo Primary School seemed to show improvement, of which, according to CM1 it was due to their involvement in supporting the school.

Not only did data help DOs in supporting schools, but DOs also indicated that using DDD helped them communicate learner performance with parents. DD2's quote illustrates this point;

*When we present the performance of the learners in a term, we present it to the parents. They can actually see, in terms of the DBE populated dashboards, they can actually see the learner... the name of the learner and their attendance, and also how the learner has performed across all the subjects. So, we present to the parents that if a learner did not present the report card to the parents, the parent knows that he will come for a meeting where we are going to do a presentation for all the learners. DD2*

From this excerpt, DDD seemed to help officials provide feedback on district performance with stakeholders and help DOs decide on the type of school intervention. CM1 shared similar

sentiments and further indicated that using the dashboard enabled them to support and advise each other as DOs on interventions needed in schools. This is how he shared his view;

*We go through every school's learner stats submission, just to check, for decision-making. For example, a circuit manager can only log onto his schools. And we are able to check if he does log on. So here in the district, what we do, when we go through triple D (DDD), in the EDMT meetings or DMT, we advise, for example, we say Mr Circuit Manager A, we have noted, for example, that your grade levels in School A, do not go to school regularly. Can you do something about it?*

The above two extracts appear to indicate that using data systems facilitates DOs' intervention practices. Data systems appear to enable DOs to have immediate access to the required information throughout the year. This would then mean that DOs do not have to wait for protracted processes to get information. The use of DDD also seems to help districts to ensure accountability among DOs. Not only among DOs, however, accountability from principals and SMTs. In the same way, another interesting finding is how DDD helped in interpreting the data, which would then inform principals on their own interventions in their schools. This is how DD1 and CM2 explained this point;

*For example, if you have data that Pinkie is forever absent, your next step is to check performance [eventually] in relation to Pinkie's attendance. Or has she covered the syllabus? Is it why that these learners are not passing, and all those things.... So, we are bringing that skill to say, try and use the information for intervention purposes, not for compliance.*

*And when we get this data, we advise the schools. We say to principals, in Grade 9 last week, you had so many absentees. Having those absentees on a Friday negatively impacted teaching and learning on that day, which means that the learners are behind with the syllabus. So, look into that issue. And also, we advise for them to say, for teaching and learning to take place throughout the week, but in that class, there is absenteeism on Fridays. CM2*

These quotes seem to indicate that using data management systems helps not only DOs on their practices to support schools, but also principals who use the same information to monitor and support their teachers and SMTs. Some participants affirmed the advantage of using data



dashboard to establish content challenges and have a holistic view of school performance per subject to make a better judgment. For example, DCLI2 said;

*Data dashboard is useful because you can immediately identify the challenges. And it is helpful sometimes you will find something, like for example, in Life Orientation they all have 80%, but in their English, they will have 40%. So, immediately you can ask, but what is it? Is it because they are too lenient in Life Orientation. But even at one school, you will find that in Life Orientation they had 50%, but in English 60%. Then you see red lights because in Life Orientation they should be better than in English. That is just an example that I have detected at some stage.*

The above quote suggests that the use of a data-based management system apparently provides a broader view of learner performance so that there is an enhanced understanding of learner performance. For some participants, it appeared that principals just forwarded data to schools without analysing the data. This then caused a problem when the district presented data to principals because principals could not accept data presented as true. CLI2 captured this concern;

*When we have the data conversation, what is interesting with principals, it is so funny; we use the data that they give us. For example, like now, we have received the term stats, their performance for term four; we have received a number of learners that are going to be progressed, numbers that are going to be promoted and numbers that are going to be retained. We take all this data per subject and so on and analyse it. We look at the subjects that did not perform well. Then we go to those schools. We present statistics that they gave us. But what is interesting is that when we go principals and present, we put it on PowerPoint, they are like, where did you get this? It is so fascinating, that. How can you ask us where did we get? Because this is what you gave us.*

This passage suggests that when DOs use data-informed leadership practice, it enhances instructional conversations with principals. However, it came out from some DOs that there seemed to be a challenge in some schools in understanding the importance of data in decision-making related to teaching and learning support. Another curriculum official shared a similar view of the principals' lack of data analysis skills to make data-informed decisions. However,

it seemed that principals do not get training or development in this regard. He indicated that principals are always reminded about the use of data. DCLI1 explained;

*Analysis skills seem to be a challenge to principals. Like we will say, here is your data; what do you do with your data? Because your data must tell you about the best papers, and it must guide you against your risk, and so on. Now again, maybe we place emphasis on it, but I think it will take time to really enhance the skills of interpreting data.*

DD1 acknowledged that principals somehow did not see the use of data to inform their decisions as important; he, however, alluded to that, they advised principals on the importance of using data in their schools;

*What we normally do is to say, to tell principals not to underestimate the value of data, you know. But, you know, the skill that we are busy working on, to say, how do you interpret that? So, that data can tell you exactly where to intervene. Because we are just trying everything, but we are not hitting the core, to say, this is what the problem is. So, if you have data, then you know.*

CM1 concurred and shared his experience on how he interacted with principals regarding the importance of using data;

*We go to schools, we say, principals, you must be hands-on in terms of curriculum. Check what happens every day. Check your dashboard, it will give you a percentage, the assessment data that has been captured per Grade, per teacher, and then you can take a decision. Unlike you are caught at the end of the year. Learner parents come and say, learners were never given work the whole year. Now, with assessment data, I am also able to zoom in into a school and check, are our learners being given work.*

It appears that when DOs use data as a means to support schools, it enhances teaching and learning. If DOs use data, they are also able to facilitate conversations about learner performance with principals. In that way, principals also realise the importance of using data for their own decision-making for supporting teaching and learning in their schools.

In summary, what emerges from this theme is the importance that DOs attach to the use of data to inform decisions of supporting schools and how they (DOs) ensure accessibility of data to all levels of the department. Investment in data and perceived usefulness of data came out strongly from most participants in both districts. It also emerged that the use of DDD facilitated the use and management of data in terms of collecting, storing, dissemination and accessibility of school and student-related data. Quite telling in the above extracts is the need for capacity development for principals on data use. District officials' endeavour to foster a data-driven culture emerged from participants' accounts. Literature supports the district leaders' use of data as a leadership practice that improves learner performance by enhancing teaching and learning (Honig et al., 2010; Knapp et al., 2014). Seemingly, when DOs have conversations with principals about the importance of data, principals would understand the use of data not for compliance but for them to make informed teaching and learning decisions. This is similar to the findings by Louis et al. (2010, see also Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2012), who found that district data-use practices could substantially influence principals' practices of data use. Another theme: DOs' use of support systems as enablers to support teaching and learning is discussed below.

### **6.3 DOs' use of support structures as enablers to support teaching and learning**

From all participants' responses, three sub-themes regarding the use of support structures to support teaching and learning in schools emerged prominently. Firstly, it emerged that availing resources served as an enabler for learners to perform in schools regardless of their socioeconomic backgrounds. Secondly, Member of the Executive Council (MEC)' Ten Pillars appeared to frame DOs' approach to supporting teaching and learning across all schools. Lastly, DOs felt that the provincial education office's curriculum implementation strategic framework guided them to monitor teaching and learning in schools. These four sub-themes are discussed below.

#### **6.3.1 Bridging the gap through availing resources**

It came out from several participants that the provincial department succeeded in narrowing the gap between affluent (Former Model C) schools and schools in impoverished communities through providing resources to learners that are in underprivileged communities. DOs indicated that districts had managed to bridge the gap in resources between schools by ensuring that all schools have minimum resources needed to deliver teaching and learning by providing

interactive boards and ICT, scholar transport, nutrition, and other resources. This is how DD2 comprehensively illuminated this point;

*Lots of budget goes to township schools to bring them to speed in terms of the resources. So, in terms of the factors that impact negatively, I would not raise an issue that much regarding the resources to teaching and learning, but I would raise an issue of quality teaching and learning taking place in the classroom. Our schools have the minimum required resources to deliver on teaching and learning, and with the SMART boards in the township schools and informal settlements, we are expanding to give them more than what our schools can really have. Comparatively speaking, in the former Model C schools and the schools sitting in those underprivileged communities, we cannot say there is a big gap at this stage. The school environment in all schools has got enabling conditions. For instance, I mentioned the issue of scholar transport for learners who come from an informal settlement. They are given tablets, scholar transport and nutrition.*

CM2 shared similar sentiments and further reported that absenteeism had decreased with scholar transport and nutrition provided to indigent learners. She further indicated that by providing two meals, learners were able to stay after school to continue with studies;

*Our learners are able to stay longer in our schools. You go to schools after three, after four, our children are still there. With Grade 12, because we encourage morning and afternoon classes to improve performance, we also cook for them after school, then they are served a meal so that they can proceed with the afternoon. So, even the rate of absenteeism has decreased because of that.*

Provision of resources by the provincial department to DOs was perceived as enabling DOs to do their work of supporting teaching and learning in schools to some participants. Laptops and cars that DOs had helped them do their work easier because they could communicate among themselves and schools. They could also visit schools without any challenge. This is what CLI2 said;

*We also have resources. We have now been given laptops, facilitators, and DCEs; we have our own laptops. Such gadgets have made life easy for us now. Unlike, you need to be somewhere and come back and run to the office, come and type. So, we*

*have gadgets with us. The cars that the department gave us, subsidised cars. I can easily plan my day and my schedule. Those things, they make life to go on, ja.*

From the above extracts, there seemed to be an agreement by the participants that the provision of resources enabled DOs to support teaching and learning in schools. Honig et al. (2010) found that DOs should invest in instructional leadership by availing resources to schools to sustain improvement efforts that support teaching and learning. This would then ensure that all schools could perform to their ability as learners from schools in underprivileged communities were provided with the resources that bridge the gap. Literature shows that districts are primarily critical in achieving and sustaining systemic improvement of quality teaching and learning to all students, especially learners from deprived communities (Honig et al., 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Knapp et al., 2014; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). The subsequent section shifts the focus to the MEC Ten Pillars as an enabling system for supporting teaching and learning.

### **6.3.2 Using MEC Ten Pillars as a frame to support teaching and learning**

Member of the Executive Council (MEC)'s Ten Pillars appeared to frame the DOs approach to supporting teaching and learning across all schools. These pillars are developed by the MEC for education in the province as a strategic plan for education in the province. This was evident from several participants. DOs frequently described their interventions and practices as informed by MEC's Ten Pillars which they believe were the cornerstone of DOs day-to-day operations. Data revealed that these Ten Pillars helped DOs in many ways. Not only did these pillars help them in supporting teaching and learning in schools and districts, but also in garnering support from different stakeholders. From the document, PowerPoint presentation, I have extracted the slide that listed MEC Ten Pillars. This slide indicates that Pillar 1, curriculum and assessment is the core pillar that is supported by all other pillars; see Figure 6.2 below.

- 
- Pillar 1: Curriculum and Assessment Development
    - Core pillar and priority of the Department - Oversight and support in the delivery of curriculum in the classroom.
  - Pillar 2: Teacher Provision and Support
  - Pillar 3: Leadership and Management
  - Pillar 4: Infrastructure Development and maintenance
  - Pillar 5: Planning, finance and resourcing
  - Pillar 6: ICT in Education
  - Pillar 7: Social Cohesion
  - Pillar 8: School functionality including community involvement
  - Pillar 9: Skills Development
  - Pillar 10: Access to quality Early Child Development (ECD)

*Figure 6.2: MEC Ten Pillars*

Several participants' accounts illustrated how DOs applied MEC's Ten Pillars when supporting schools. This is how CM2 elucidated;

*Whenever we run our meetings, every topic in a meeting, whether it is curriculum, whether it is LTSM [Learning and Teaching Support Material], whether it is governance, whether it is RCL [Representative Council for Learners], every presentation that I make, must be linked to the Ten Pillars, because you want to advocate the Ten Pillars to the masses. People must understand why the Ten Pillars because the purpose of the Ten Pillars is to translate the vision of the MEC and the mission. So, that is what we do. CM2*

Another participant highlighted what these ten pillars entail and what they mean to them as DOs. He indicated that these pillars frame their discussions and strategies in their districts. This is what he said:

*We have ten pillars in the system. Those pillars are part of strategies or key deliverables in the system. When you check the pillars, they talk to what I must do as an official. Ten Pillars got teacher provision; we have leadership and management, quality of teaching and learning, school infrastructure, ICT education, and all those pillars, including social cohesion. We are part of the system; we must support all those things; we support and monitor and ensure that teachers and SMTs deliver. DCLI2*

One participant, DD2, expounded how one pillar is used to garner support from community stakeholders and other government sectors. This is how she expressed her view

*In terms of Pillar number 7 and 8 of the MEC Ten Pillars, we have social cohesion and community involvement. We are looking at all government departments as our stakeholder for us to be able to achieve that. We have SAPS and the Department of Social Services working very closely with us on drug and substance abuse issues. We have Health Wednesdays, and the Department of Health, working very closely with us. Over and above that, we have businesses partners. Schools have different sponsors, different companies; they are on board. Because when the MEC advocated, he also made a broad call to all businesses partners, so some of them just found an opportunity to attach directly to the school and not come through the province.*

The above quotes in this sub-theme seem to suggest that partnership between district and provincial level leaders is vital to improving teaching and learning. This assertion is consistent with the findings, which indicate that when system-level officials provide leadership that supports and provides guidance to districts, teaching, and learning improves (Leithwood, 2010). This would mean that system-level leaders should play a role in interpreting the policy to provide direction to districts. The following sub-theme further elaborates on state leadership's role in enhancing DO leadership practices that enhanced teaching and learning through a curriculum intervention strategic framework developed by state-level education officials.

### **6.3.3 System-Wide School Improvement Strategy curriculum management framework as a means to monitor and support curriculum coverage**

A curriculum implementation strategic framework was developed by the provincial education office that all participants felt guided them to monitor teaching and learning in schools. DOs viewed the use of the strategic curriculum framework, System-Wide School Improvement Strategy (SWSIS), to ensure that there is also accountability on curriculum coverage and assessment. This is how DD2 summarised the SWSIS framework;

*We have got a SWSIS model for curriculum implementation... a model that says that schools must be able to account on syllabus completion and school base assessment on a six-week period. So, we are taking a cue from the model, where the syllabus coverage must be accounted for at the end of that six weeks in a period of about six weeks. We then are able to establish which schools have not covered the*

*amount of content knowledge that the learners must have achieved. We look at the assessments, the performance level that these learners are presenting in terms of the assessments, where the learners are performing below, what is expected in that particular subject, and then develop intervention specific to that particular subject's learning content.*

CLI shared a similar understanding of the importance of the SWSIS model and added that it enabled teachers to pace the content. This is what she said;

*These are the eight cycles of the SWSIS né. Moreover, now you can see that term one here, you are saying cycle one and two in term one, né. Now it is six weeks. This is, you know. In twenty-five days, we are saying that between Grade 1 and 11, there must have covered 15% of the work. That is why there, somewhere, I was talking about ATPs. We have updated our ATPs to suit all this. You know, because sometimes we are saying learners are not covering the syllabus, you know. But now with the SWSIS, it forces them.*

This shows that the SWSIS curriculum framework is meant for curriculum management. Not only is it for tracking content coverage and the number of assessment activities, but it also assists DOs in decision-making in terms of intervention plans and support to schools. Some officials indicated that SWSIS is structured to enhance the line of accountability and responsibility in terms of curriculum. It also ensures that everybody understands their role in managing curriculum and also show how to intervene and support subordinates. This is what DCLI1 had to say;

*SWSIS strategy tells you the roles and responsibilities and how to support HoDs, how do you support your teachers in your department. HoDs, deputy principals, how do you support your HoDs. And how do they report to you? And then, principal, how do you support your SMTs and teachers. And then it goes up even to the District Office.*

Similarly, CM1 said;

*With SWSIS, school managers understand their role. We say, as a deputy principal, you need to understand your role, and once you understand your role as a deputy principal, so you are going to ensure that the HoDs understand theirs, and the*



*Educators understand theirs and then the principals as well. That will tell them how to manage the curriculum at the school, ensuring that there is teaching and learning that is effectively taking place at the school. So, that is happening.*

Seemingly, the most critical aspect of the SWSIS model is to enhance the line of accountability as well as curriculum coverage among DOs and schools. While participants conceptualise this framework differently, all participants agreed that the curriculum framework, The SWSIS was useful to ensure that everyone across districts and schools understands their role in teaching and learning. In the section that follows, I give an account of what DOs leadership practice regarded as a differentiated approach to supporting schools. Below is the presentation and discussion of findings of the theme: Enacting a differentiated approach to supporting schools.

What emerges from this theme is the importance of providing resources for schools from impoverished communities to bridge the gap between these schools and affluent schools. Another finding that emerges is the importance of provincial leader involvement in the pursuit of improving teaching and learning. It came out that the involvement of the MEC created a structure that enabled the DOs to frame their strategies of supporting schools. Additionally, when provincial leaders provide a curriculum framework of monitoring and supporting teaching and learning, it facilitates DOs involvement in supporting schools.

#### **6.4 Enacting a differentiated approach to supporting schools**

When participants gave accounts on their leadership practices that support teaching and learning, almost all DOs indicated that their approach to supporting schools was multi-pronged and was based on learner performance. For example, DD1 indicated that DOs approach to supporting schools was based on the results. This is how he described how DOs categorised schools according to learner performance;

*So, your base will be your underperforming schools which you will have categorised by using the results. Then that sets the tone to say, this is what we will be looking at, you know, then from there, the coordination of all the resources to support those schools that we have identified to be underperforming.*

This quote seems to highlight the need for DOs to prioritise schools that do not perform well when they do interventions. What also seems to emerge from his account is the need to coordinate resources to prioritise underperforming schools. It may be no surprise that all DOs

shared how they support schools using learner performance results. The DOs' use of assessment results as a basis for interventions came out from the participants. However, they categorised schools according to different variables. DD1 illustrated;

*We have got what we call our high flyers, né. We have got what you call UPS. Your underperforming schools. New schools, meaning those that are entering the system now, né, and schools with Grade 12 for the first time. So, we are not taking a similar approach because these schools, their needs are not the same. Then we will be targeting them.*

This extract appears to indicate that DOs intervention in schools is multi-pronged. It also highlights the need for DOs to consider the schools' contextual factors as schools' needs might differ. As a result, DOs need to categorise schools according to school needs based on the learner performance results and other information. CM1 shared the same view as DD1 about prioritising schools that perform poorly. However, CM1 further elaborated that interventions for schools that perform well are also supported based on their needs analysis. This is what CM1 said;

*Obviously, as I have many schools, I cannot see all of them in one week, but in terms of my plan, underperforming and high-risk schools, I must see them every second day. I start with Maths, at seven o'clock. So, in terms of supporting principals, we are saying, our approach is, needs analysis. Particularly around well-performing and self-managing schools, we say to the principal, do the analysis of your personal needs, right, and tell me, where can I come in.*

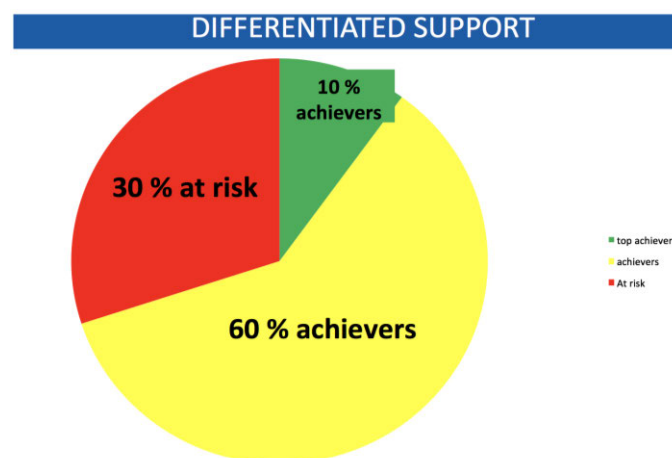
Some participants stated that school principals were supported depending on what came out in schools' needs analysis. This is what CM1 said;

*It may be a challenge around curriculum provisioning and resources. No textbooks, no what, what, and the like, or on learner achievement. Learners are not achieving as they are supposed to. Based on the needs analysis from principals themselves, we say, principal, this is where you need development. Then the principal will say, I need to be supported on 1 2 3. And then this is how we structure it. We do not want to have a one-size-fits-all because it is failing.*

From these extracts, DOs accounts seem to show that, for improvement of teaching and learning to be evident, DOs did not use a one-size-fits-all approach to support schools. It also appears that, while there seems to be a top-down approach to supporting underperforming schools, schools that perform well are given opportunities to devise their development plans. Similarly, CLI2 stated that; an interventionary approach is integrated to include all schools so that all schools across performance levels as in the dashboard are accommodated. This is what CLI2 said;

*We have red schools that are doing badly, and then we have our average schools that are amber, and we have our green schools. But you also do not lose sight of those that we term to be performing or green schools. We say, in a week, we need to include at least, so like let me say, not really a week, in a term we will say, maybe we will focus on thirty schools, and out of the thirty, ten schools will be out of the green bracket. And then the other twenty will be from the red and amber bracket.*

From these excerpts, it would appear that while DOs aspired to prioritise underperforming schools, they do not lose sight of ensuring that schools that perform improve performance. This was corroborated by the observation I made whereby DOs in the leadership of DD1 had a meeting with the principals of all schools in their district. In this meeting, DOs presented a strategic framework of how they would offer support to schools. Figure 6.3 below shows one slide of the presentation for the stakeholders' meeting held on 18 July 2017 that CLI1 presented. It indicates the differentiated approach of including schools across performances when DOs supported schools.



*Figure 6.3: Differentiated approach extracted from the Power-Point Presentation*

It again emerged that instead of focusing on many schools, District Office 1 also used another strategy of having four focus schools per circuit, two primary schools and two secondary schools. This resulted in DOs prioritising sixteen schools per semester that received intensive support. DD1 said;

*As a strategy, we have identified four schools from each of the four circuits. We are calling them the schools of focus. There are two primary schools and two high schools. So, in everything that we do in this office, those sixteen schools, when you report, you must report on them, so that we know that any resource that we deploy, we are deploying to those schools, and we take them through for a period of six-months intensive support. Then from there, we evaluate. If they have not moved, we continue, and if they have moved, then for the remaining six months, we bring another school. So, that we see that; at the end of the year, you must have at least turned around sixteen schools as a start, the following year, another sixteen, just like that.*

This corroborates the document, minutes of the DMT meeting held on 4 September 2017 that I reviewed. In this document, it came out that each member of the DMT was allocated one school among the sixteen focus schools. In these minutes, each DMT member reported on the intervention they had made in each school. The following extract from the minutes of the meeting shows DCL11's report on one school;

*There are extra classes taking place in the afternoons. Parents, counsellors, and the community ensure that the learners are safe when studying in the afternoons at school. There is a motivational speaker who was invited to motivate learners. Educators are dedicated to Quick Wins and Mind the Gap. Two learners are reported as pregnant (the one will deliver in September and the other in October). Due to the lack of classes available for extra classes, the learners have been using the library until the next morning. Educators are teaching on weekends (Saturdays and Sundays) to support learners who are struggling. Challenge: An Economics educator for Grade 10 and Eleven is not qualified to teach the subject because she did not study Economics in Grade 12. It is then believed that this is one of the reasons the learners are not doing well in Grade 12. (Minutes of the DMT meeting held on April 2017)*

DOs appeared to be categorising schools according to learner performance and then providing support to schools that underperform. What seems to emerge is the need for DOs to practise multi-pronged differentiated approaches to supporting schools. Even though there is a general agreement in all participants, DD1 and CM2 made an interesting statement on a needs-based approach to supporting schools. They indicated that while DOs allowed schools opportunities to indicate what areas they need to be supported on, they encourage principals and DOs to understand the rationale behind strategies sought to be undertaken. This is what CM2 said;

*They know, the minute somebody says to me, morning classes, then what? What informs the morning class? So, we are pushing them to be very specific and direct when they develop their intervention strategies. You know, so, we are going to say, I am going to conduct morning classes. Why? You must indicate the gap of the learners. What do you think is the gap? Is it time? Is it a lack of understanding? Is it a lack of pre-knowledge? Then your intervention strategy is going to address the pre-knowledge, so our intervention strategies become very specific and direct. And our strategies, we are also saying, are not one-size-fits-all. Learners differ, schools differ.*

Similarly, DD1 noted the importance of understanding the school needs before they offer support to schools. He noted: *If I say for an example, we are going to monitor late coming, firstly why, you must have a reason why. We use that, you know.*

The excerpts above seem to highlight the importance of principals' ability to interpret data so that they have a broader understanding of what support principals need from DOs. This then implies that principals need to have the capacity to interpret data so that they could make informed decisions about the type of intervention they need. This also highlights the importance of having data conversations between DOs and principals. It shows that with such conversations, principals are able to reflect on their schools' performance.

While all participants shared similar understandings about their differentiated approach to supporting teaching and learning, few participants reported that DOs used an intervention approach which is a national strategy to improve Grade 12 learner performance, Secondary School Improvement Plan (SSIP) to support schools. CM2 affirmed the importance of SSIP: *We advocate schools, Secondary School Improvement Plan. We advocate very strongly on SSIP. DD2 said that the district office prioritised the SSIP intervention strategy to improve*

Grade 12 results, particularly for learners in poor socioeconomic communities. This is what she said;

*So, we have prioritised Secondary School Improvement Plan (SSIP), even in the extra classes of schools and so on. So, we are monitoring and measuring the performance of schools' results in the exit year. SSIP adds value, particularly to the schools in Quintile 1, 2, 3. And I think it is really making an impact in the sense that my best-performing learners are actually coming from those schools.*

These quotes seem to suggest that DOs found themselves having to prioritise Grade 12 in their approach to supporting schools. This is no surprise because Grade 12 results are always publicised as the main measuring tool for learning outcomes in SA. However, few participants shared their concerns about the national focus, which is mainly on Grade 12 results. They believed that because district performance is measured using Grade 12 results, schools and districts mainly focus on supporting only Grade 12 learners by providing mainly Grade 12 learners with intervention programmes. While these districts have been performing well in Grade 12, they acknowledged that lower grades were not performing well. DOs used two different metaphors. DCLI1 said: *how can you build a solid roof when the foundation is weak.* While DD2 stated: *In Grade 12, you only want the Tuscan roof and nothing more. Now that Tuscan roof is like shaky because the foundation and walls are weak.* DOs shared a similar concern on the centrality of Grade 12 as a measure of district performance. One participant shared;

*The unfortunate thing is, we are also result-driven because you are measured by your matric results, so you cannot ignore your Grade 12 and say we focus on all the other things, because we are a result-driven nation, and that is why you will see most of the focus is on Grade 12, which I feel is wrong. It is very, very wrong. Quantitatively we are doing okay because our results are always above 80% in Grade 12. But now go to Grade 9 it bad. And I am not talking about my district; I am talking about nationally.* DCLI1

DD2 shared her view on how focusing on Grade 12 impacted the throughput of learner performance across all other grades;

*One of the reasons why I am saying so, if you look at the number of learners who enter the system in Grade 1 and the learners who exit the system in Grade 12, you*

*have more than ten thousand learners entering a system in any district, lots of them, but it is shocking to see that at the end of their 12th year, they are in Grade 12, you have half the number of learners or less who are sitting for Grade 12.*

DOs also shared their concern on focusing on the results at the expense of quality and of preparing learners to be able to pursue careers after they finish school;

*Performance of any district is measured through the extent at which you deliver on Grade 12 performance. The quantity of numbers that pass. But an aspect of quality, which for me, is supposed to be critical. Unfortunately, this is how the system is structured; the more learners pass, that is what we hear. But I do not think it is a good indicator. DD2*

DOs also shared their views on how focusing mainly on Grade 12 learners impacted negatively on other grades. They shared their experience on how this resulted in schools using quality teachers on Grade 12 while ignoring lower grades. *DD1 noted: We have the issue of content gaps, especially you see, if you look at Grades 8 and 9. We have got serious challenges because most schools do not use their best educators for those grades, which is a problem.* Other participants shared their experience on how he analysed Grade 12 results against lower grades. *DCLI2 stated*

*In the support sessions, the first thing that I always do with schools. I will take from the analysis of Grade 12 results and check the schools that are not performing well. Check them visa vie, the schools that are not performing well. You will find that it is so complex, Pinkie because in some instances, schools will be smart, performing well in Grade 12, everything is in order, but when you come to Grade 8 and 9 in the same school, it is a mess.*

In this theme, there seems to be a common view among participants regarding the leadership practices of DOs regarding interventions DOs perform when supporting schools to improve teaching and learning. These include DOs' use of learner performance data to categorise schools, enabling DOs to prioritise underperforming schools. However, DOs believed that they attempted to support schools that were also performing well. For them to do that, adapt their strategies such that they also integrate support to all schools while they differentiate their approach. With this, they could have a broader understanding of schools' performance. This finding corroborates previous research, which suggests that, instead of a 'one-size-fits-all'

approach, district leaders should find ways to differentiate support for schools based on their distinctive performance needs and related circumstances (Anderson et al., 2012; Knapp et al., 2014). This may include targeted intervention at specific schools, responsive intervention from school needs and categorical intervention, which the district office imposes. As a result, district leaders need to develop and implement differentiated and integrated strategies to bring coherence across differing school contexts (Childress et al., 2007; Hopkins, 2007). The next section presents and discusses the findings of DOs visibility in schools.

### **6.5 District officials' visibility in schools**

While discussing their leadership practices that support schools, most participants shared their experiences of how they visited schools to monitor and support principals, SMTs and teachers. However, districts visited schools differently. While participants in District Office 1 visited schools frequently, District Office 2 participants seemed not to have been able to visit schools often. One participant from District Office 2 indicated that they visited schools only when there was a crisis in that particular school. This is what DCLI2 said:

*But unfortunately, when you go to schools, it is mostly following up on challenges. So, for me, I find it difficult that you are always busy with crisis type of management. So, you plan, but it is not realised all the time.*

This quote seems to suggest that DOs in District Office 2 found it challenging to be visible in schools. CLI2 from the same district said that DOs in her district visited schools to motivate learners once per term. This is how she explained;

*We visit schools once a term to monitor, support and evaluate how far we are; we also check whether we are going together. We will be allocated schools that, these are your schools and so on. So, all CLI staff will be allocated to schools.*

Participants from District Office 2 appeared not to have been able to be visible in schools frequently. However, most District Office 1 officials mentioned that being visible in schools helped them have first-hand information about their day-to-day teaching and learning operations. This is what DD1 said: *We want to play a role where we actually go into the schools* DD1. CM1 explicitly stated that DOs need to visit schools frequently. He claimed: *We are not people who sit in the office and go to schools once a year. We see our schools almost every day, particularly when it comes to leadership.*



DD1 indicated that in his district, there were multi-pronged teams that would visit schools based on the needs of that particular school;

*But basically, all DCEs will lead that team, right. The DCEs ja. And then any member who will belong to that team that goes to a particular school, it will be on the basis of the challenges in that school, ja. So, you go to that school because you have a particular school that that school requires, then you go in there and give it that support.*

DOs from District Office 1 stated that they had a School Support Team (SST) strategy. Using this strategy, they indicated that they were able to visit schools every day in the morning to monitor the attendance of teachers and learners. They were also able to monitor content coverage and meet with SMT. DD1 explained;

*But then, there is a strategy that we are using, and we termed it SST, School Support Teams. What we do there is four things. We monitor late coming, both educators and learners and the teams start at seven o'clock. We monitor the first period, where there is teaching and learning taking place in the first period. Then we monitor absenteeism, both learners and teachers, so that if those are not coming, then we can see how much time is lost and all those things. We also emphasise assessment just to see if this is the learners are assessed.*

CM1 elaborated on how they use SSTs;

*Because our Director is also passionate in terms of curriculum issues, everybody, as long as you are an office-based Educator, you are put into these programs, whether you are under curriculum, or whether you are in whatever, to say, this is a district project. So, everybody is given a school to go and assist. We call it the Director's Project, that is the SST, to say, every morning, half-past seven, you must report at school, not even half past, from seven o'clock we are reporting at a particular school. In each and every team, there is a team leader.*

DCLI shared similar sentiments;

*We have school visits. The school visits take place every day, as per our schedule, like, now Director must sign my schedule. He must sign it because it is there. It is*

now where we inform our schools or our programs for term one. So, we have school visits as per schedule. DCLI1

District Office 1 officials further elaborated on the aspect of SSTs which is My School Project. They explained how they monitor content coverage by grabbing a school bag to check if learners were given work. DD1 and CM1 spelt out;

*We have got what you call my school bag project. With the school project, when you go to a school, any learner that you find, you just grab their school bag. You can go to classes, see to that school bag. It will tell us a story, what is happening. Without even going to the principal, that thing just... DD1*

*We check their teaching, we grab a school bag any time for any learner, and we target especially the late ones because we do not want to disrupt, at least, the teachers. Just check the books. The learners' books can tell you a lot about what is happening in class or what's not happening. So, when we grab them, we just make our notes, and after that, we discuss with the principal to say, you know, we have checked something like this, we have identified this and that...I will be looking at learner books, né. CM1*

The above extracts corroborated the document I reviewed, which showed how DOs monitored schools. This document reveals that the DOs monitored late-coming for both teachers and learners. Dos also checked content-related information in learners' books. See Figure 6.4 below.

3	Teaching & Learning		A	G	
3.1	Does the first period start on time?			X	
3.2	Are all learners in class by 08:00?		X		(There are still learners arriving late)
3.3	Are all teachers in class by 08:00?				
3.4	Is teaching and learning taking place?				First period used for register
3.5	Does the school control and manage late coming of learners?			X	Not started in many of the schools. Some have started.
3.6	Do the learners have sufficient work in their books? (School bag) Evidence based search.				Learner bag - Craig Woodford 10E only 2 books in his bag. English - only 3 exercises - " 1 exercise  Learner book - Komagelo Tsoetsoi 9E - English Test - Comprehension & Language - Only 2 comprehensions for the term. Only 1 Activity marked for the term.

Figure 6.4: SST tools extracted from District 1 monitoring instrument

According to DOs, visibility in schools helped them understand the *modus operandi* of teaching and learning. Working together as a team, both curriculum support and circuit management helped them address both the quantity and quality of the work of supporting schools. By working together as a team, they could intervene immediately and follow up. CM1 summarised this clearly on how the circuit manager and curriculum officials collaborate;

*I am not a Curriculum Specialist; when I open a learner's book, I do not look at the quality, I look at the quantity. I count the number of exercises. This child in Mathematics, one, two, three, four, five, six, seven, eight. You see, we call it 'search a bag' according to our district. And I write, so and so, Mathematics, Grade 8 has got eight exercises. They check the quality; at the end of the week, I give them my report, and I say, this child at school A, I counted eight exercises. They will make a follow-up to say, ei, ei; something is not right, you see? But not the quality. I do not know whether it is right or wrong. So, that is how we work. We understand it in that way. The curriculum people, when they have challenges with teachers and what have you, on curriculum, they will report to me. And say, we found 1, 2, 3, can you assist us? Right, then I go to the school and say, principal, I have had this report about this teacher. The teacher is far behind with work. What is the challenge? Is it because of absenteeism? Any early departures? What have you? Because if they do not go into issues of needs, HR matters. But after checking and talking to the teacher, because I will talk to the teacher and the supervisor of the teacher, who is an HoD or the Deputy. Then at a later stage, I give them feedback. I have intervened. That is how we work in this. CM1*

Quite noteworthy in this theme is how DOs' team approach to supporting schools through school visits could enhance communication within DOs as well as between DOs and school SMTs and teachers in the quest for improving teaching and learning through monitoring and support. What also emerges is that; DOs visibility in schools promotes accountability among DOs. Moreover, from the above passages, there seems to be a general agreement on the need for DOs to be visible and accessible to schools. There is also an indication that when DOs work together as a team, they enhance their practices of supporting schools. By being visible in schools, DOs can intervene and provide feedback in real-time. It also came out that DOs were not only visible in schools; they were also visible in the communities. Hence, below is the

presentation and discussion of the theme: District-community partnerships as a strategy when supporting schools.

## **6.6 Garnering support through community-district partnerships**

Forging partnerships emerged as another strategy for DOs. Most DOs talked about the importance of involving key stakeholders in their districts to drive their strategy of improving teaching and learning. For example, DD2 believed that as mandated by the education delivery, she committed herself and her district team to have quarterly meetings with the stakeholders to account for the district's performance and the district's achievement targets. She explained;

*To carry the vision through, to carry the strategic frameworks of the districts, we to go down to the last person on the ground, the stakeholders, you know, to share how we are taking the district forward...Look, the mandate of education is that education processes must be grounded in the communities. So, that is why I have quarterly meetings with the structures on the ground. Our stakeholders, our SGBs, our structures with interest in education...it is being done in each and every term throughout the year. Everybody is involved in making it possible that we achieve targets that are set for our...the systems that we put in place are systems that speak to accountability.*

This excerpt illuminates the potential aspect of garnering partnerships with the communities by DOs. It also seems to indicate the importance of accountability to stakeholders regularly. It would then mean that; involving stakeholders in the communities involves having a continued relationship. Similarly, DD1 shared a similar strategic approach of involving stakeholders and further identified key stakeholders that they involve in his district. He believed that involving them assisted the district in enhancing quality teaching and learning. This is what he had to say;

*Basically, what we are saying is, any person who has got an interest in education, whether it is business, whether it is faith-based organisations, NGO, you know, political parties, everybody that got an interest. So that they can assist in pushing the quality of learning and teaching up, and ja.*

Some participants cited an example of how they involve stakeholders. They also talked about the importance of involving political leaders in the community. Below, CM1 and DD2 illuminated how DOs involved the political leaders in the community;

*So, leadership goes with creativity. We go all out, for example, to talk to stakeholders. No policy says I must go and discuss with a councillor. We go to a councillor, we say, council, we are running admission in your Ward. We have challenge 1, 2 and 3. Your people have come to register late. Assist us as a councillor in your community meetings to push up issues around admissions. You see, it is leadership. The leadership, you know, style and role that we play in the district. So, that is how we work. DD2*

These two responses suggest that building lasting relationships with the communities helps DOs address challenges by involving community leaders. Similarly, CLI1 corroborated and further shared how community involvement helped the district to be stabilised: *We are also meeting PCOs (Parliamentary Constituents Officers) and all that, once a term. That is why maybe, the district also is a bit stabilised because we do not have problems.* DD2 and CM1 explained how political structures and other community structures are important stakeholders and how getting stakeholders to benefit the district in dealing with the issues and challenges in the community. They illustrated by citing an example of how the community assisted the district when there were delivery protests in the community. Because of the ongoing relationship with stakeholders, including other government departments, the district management ensured that teaching and learning disturbances were minimal during these protests. This is how they explained this point;

*I can make an example also, with service delivery protests. You cannot, as a department, deal with service delivery protests, but the structures on the ground are able to inform you timeously as a District Director, to say, there is a planned march towards municipality services, this is what we are going to make sure that it does not affect the schools. I am then able to call my principals very quickly to say, at this particular time, make sure that your safety personnel, your patrollers that are manning the entrance of the school, the gates are locked. They would have informed me that they will do the police's visibility and make sure that once the gates are locked, there is nobody who is going to get into the premises. And in most cases, secondary schools are targets. So, the police play a significant role. They*

*monitor our schools; they are visible. During times of strikes and so on, the police are there.*

Similarly, CM2 shared the same experience;

*We have political partners. We work very closely with the PCO; they are the Parliamentary Constituents Offices, which helps us to understand what is happening on the ground. Remember, our role to guard jealously against disruption of teaching and learning, so our involvement with the PCO helps us be the first-hand, you know, recipients of information whenever there are planned service delivery protests and all that. They inform us of their program of action. So, if you follow in the news, you will notice that very seldom are schools disrupted in this province when there are service delivery protests, learners are protected. So that is those are the stakeholders that help us a lot as well, you know.*

Apart from community stakeholders and other government departments, business stakeholders came out from some participants. For example, DD2 mentioned curriculum-related publishers,

*Yes, the partners, the curriculum-related partners, publishers. In this district, I have quite a lot of partners that have an interest in education, by way of sponsoring workshops of educators through funding, by way of sponsoring for our award ceremonies, our Grade 12 award ceremonies and all other grades in the internal phases of the district, supporting curriculum implementation, like the Maths and Science strategies. I have lots of such. And also, our Metro is very supportive, from the Mayoral Office to the last person in the Council, they support me with bursaries. So, there is a lot of external support that we are getting—a lot of it.*

Likewise, CLI2 shared similar sentiments on the role of book publishers on curriculum-related support. She made an example of how they got supported;

*And there are also service providers, book publishers, they are always there for us, to say, whenever maybe you have, like for example, I have identified, shapes are a challenge. I can just easily call them and tell them, come and workshop our schools, we have problems with shapes. They will bring resources; they will bring whatever, they will be there. Those are the people that keep me going, those stakeholders.*

While participants viewed stakeholders as important, DD2 acknowledged that sometimes stakeholders might get involved while having their agendas. This is what she said;

*Because stakeholders are many and all of them have got different agendas. While making sure that they support education in the different spaces where they are sitting...we need to emphasise the mandates. We need to ask, but what is the mandate of government about education in this current leadership. So, we stick by that, and we make sure that we do not lose our focus even when we were subjected to stakeholders who want to put a negative report about everything we are doing. We stand firm and stand solid about what we want to achieve as education.*

This quote suggests that, while it is vital to involve stakeholders, DOs need to be mindful of ensuring that they manage stakeholders by strategically protecting the interest of education in their districts. Parent involvement was another critical stakeholder that DOs believed was important in realising their supporting teaching and learning goals. CM2 noted: *Parents in the community are our most significant, biggest stakeholder. Because we are teaching children that are from parents in communities.* Most participants maintained that parents are important stakeholders they involve through meetings. CLI1 noted: *The parents, you know the parents are very, very, very, very key. And then your SGBs structures also very, very key. And we do meet parents once a term.* CLI2 justified the need to involve Grade 12 parents;

*Without the parents, you will not be able to move. For example, like the SSIP project, without the parents supporting us and encouraging their children to attend on Saturday, SIPP will not happen because we also need them to support us. We need parents to be informed, but there are also those programs that parents attend, family literacy activities that are taking place on Saturdays.*

From this quote, it appears that DOs do not just expect support from parents in their quest for improving teaching and learning. They also support parents through literacy programmes so that they would be able to support their children in schoolwork. While there are attempts to involve parents in these districts, some DOs shared their concern about the lack of parents' willingness to participate in their children's education. DD2 explained how parents abdicate their responsibility of participating in school-related activities of their children;

*But I must say, parent involvement is a problem. Parents are just not there for the learners. It is a very sad exercise. Actually, in this district, part of what I always*

*say is that let us look at the track record of these parents from the time this child was in Grade 8 up to Grade 11, and if the parent has been an absent figure, you cannot expect a miracle to happen overnight in Grade 12. That parent would still not be there. Those are some of the strategies that we have put in place.*

CLI shared a similar view on the lack of parental involvement but indicated that parents of learners who are struggling with schoolwork were not keen to attend parents' meetings that DOs convened;

*Sometimes in terms of parents, I said we are calling parents, but we find that parents do not attend meetings. When we want learners to come to school on Saturdays. The parents are not there to ensure that this child is going to wake up on Saturday and come to school.*

While DOs seemed to have succeeded in fostering relationships with most stakeholders, there was an indication that unions sometimes created some challenges for them. Participants frequently mentioned unions' political interference in their business of supporting teaching and learning as a challenge. They shared their concerns about how unions would intercept their attempts to ensure that schools operate in the interest of the core business of teaching and learning. They believed that, while unions should be protecting their members' interests, they had assumed a different role that does not assist education. CM2 shared her view;

*Unions are also very important. However, the unions have now assumed a different role. We are seeing unions now, once they are protecting the interest of the membership, but we are starting to see a different role now, where the unions are becoming the disruptors of education.*

From the participants, union interference included attempting to obstruct DOs from administering common assessment tasks across all schools. DOs explained how common assessment tasks helped their district to improve learner performance. This is how DD1 expressed his concern;

*We tried to administer standardised assessments, but you know, again, the unions just said no, we could not go that route, blah, blah. They come with so many stories, you know. But we wanted to take that approach to say, let us standardise and see*



*what happens. Because when we moved by 4%, for the whole year we were standardising the tests, you know.*

This was reiterated by DD2, who further shared her experience on how unions impacted negatively. However, DD2 indicated that through formal engagements with the unions, DOs, to some extent, can get cooperation from unions;

*Unions interfere, for instance, we have just gone through common exams, you know. Standardised assessments, which is very critical that all schools must, you know, write those common exams in the subjects that were identified as Maths, Technology, Science, you know, Natural Science. In this district, I had schools that did not write because unions say schools should administer their own assessments. So, in this district, it was the same thing that applied across all districts.*

Another concern that participants raised on the interference of union in their processes of supporting teaching and learning was not being able to observe lessons in the classrooms. DCLI1 noted: *The unfortunate thing is, we are not really allowed to go to classrooms. You know, because of the union's stance.* They believed that if they were able to observe lessons, they would be able to offer more support to teachers, particularly to improve teachers' practice. DD1 said: *The unions are refusing officials to go into the classroom, and we feel that if we are to go into the classroom, we will be able to then say, how do we support teachers? You see.* Similarly, DD2 shared the same challenge of union obstructing DOs to get into class and explained how that affects quality teaching and learning. She also noted that finding a solution to this challenge was seemingly difficult. She said;

*So, when we visit schools, we rely entirely on the learners' books the teachers' preparatory work and do not go to class. It is one factor that we feel is handicapping the quality of teaching and learning because we cannot observe teachers in practice. We cannot support in the classroom because you know. And the province is really not finding a solution to this because it is a national thing.*

CLI2 shared her views on the need for them to observe lessons instead of monitoring files and workbooks. She explained;

*We do not access classes because of unions who say we cannot go inside the classroom. So, we are confined to staffrooms where we have to sit and look at the*

*people's work and so on. We cannot go inside the classroom to support our teachers and so on. And that impacts negatively, you know. Because you do not know precisely what is inside the classroom, where you could give even much more support to the teachers. If the learner suffers and we cannot be allowed to come in and intervene and support, then why are we here? Why are we here?*

Seemingly, DOs found themselves powerless even when it came to appointments. They believed that unions have permeated into the processes of appointments of SMTs. Consequently, schools and district offices appointed incapable personnel, which negatively impacts teaching and learning. This is how CLI2 expressed her dissatisfaction;

*Union interfere when it comes to promotion appointments; we no longer appoint people based on their capabilities. We appoint because of, where do I belong, you know, union-wise, and most of our schools are going down the drain. With this, good schools are turned into bad schools now because of these appointments, which are not informed by the people's capabilities. Our education is sliding so fast down the drain because of the interference of the unions. It becomes too heavy for me as a manager because I do not know where to touch, it is burning there, once we are far away, fifty kilometres away, you are told another place is burning, whilst we have principals in schools.*

Consistent with CLI2's view on the interference of unions in the appointment of personnel, DD1 shared his experience;

*As a district, the unions are challenging us, for the past four years, if we apply for a position in the department, as a Head of Department, or a Subject Advisor, we give you a test as part of the interviews. And unions are fighting, saying; why do you give people tests? But you cannot be a Maths Facilitator if you cannot answer that question.*

What also came out on how unions impact negatively on teaching and learning was unions convening their meeting during teaching time. This is what CM1 said: *Unions are also impacting the curriculum. They will have a meeting, let us say at one o'clock, and that time from one o'clock, it is lost, and you cannot do anything. You cannot.*

These excerpts indicate that unions can hinder DOs attempts to support teaching and learning. This seems to suggest that, while unions are an important stakeholder in the education department as enshrined in the legislative policies in SA, there seems to be the misapplication of those rights. What also seems not clear in DOs articulation of union interference in their operations is how such interference could happen if policies protect DOs from exercising their role. The policy on the roles and responsibilities of DOs states that DOs need to do class visits to support teachers (RSA, 2013). In that case, there is a disjuncture between what is expected of DOs and what unions understand as the role of DOs.

In this theme, there seems to be an indication that DOs can garner support in many ways when district leaders involve community stakeholders. DOs accounts show that they were able to get support from political leaders, SGBs, curriculum-related agencies, namely, book publishers, parents, and church-based organisations. When DOs are committed to reaching out to communities through regular communication, which includes feedback on their strategies, relationships are enhanced. This is evident in how DOs shared their experiences on how they have communicated their district visions and how they had quarterly feedback meetings with the stakeholders. This is consistent with international and SA literature on the importance of district and community partnerships. This literature concurs that when educational leaders foster partnerships with communities, they manage to leverage additional support and resources from these partnerships (Honig & Copland, 2014; Khosa et al., 2013; Levin et al., 2012; Myende, 2018). Furthermore, the literature suggests that when district leaders support partnerships with family, businesses and community partnerships, student achievement can improve (Wohlstetter et al., 2004; Austin, 2010; Bennett & Thompson, 2011; Sheldon, 2016; Aidman & Baray, 2016).

## **6.7 Use of accountability and support meetings with SMTs**

From the data, participants frequently spoke about DOs' procedures of shared accountability with the SMTs as well as among themselves. When articulating what DOs do to support teaching and learning, DOs indicated that they hold accounting sessions with principals and SMTs. For example, DD2 had this to say;

*We hold sessions for accounting in terms of performance; Deputies in schools account on curricula syllabus completion and school-based assessments and any other assessments that are taking place. Principals also account at the same level.*

It is apparent from the participants' accounts that DOs held accountability sessions with the schools, mainly with principals and deputy principals. These accountability sessions focused broadly on learner performance. Accountability sessions were also used as platforms wherein principals communicated with DOs on the kind of support they required. CM1 noted;

*...after each and every term, we have what we call the accounting sessions, with the principal, wherein the principals, all of them, they come and account for their results for the term. And they also talk to their challenges so that whatever problems that we are encountering, they can be identified there, and then we can be able to come with the intervention strategies.*

CLI1 shared her view on the importance of accountability sessions. She explained that these sessions are done at the beginning of every term. This is what she explained;

*The accountability sessions, these are very, very key. At the beginning of the year, schools that did not perform, at the beginning of the term, let me say, schools that did not perform, principals come together with their SMT members, to account, to say what went wrong? You have to reflect so that whatever made you not to perform should not recur?*

So far in this theme, it emerges that DOs worked closely with the SMTs by having a conversation regarding learner performance. This would mean that having these regular accountability sessions would keep DOs in the loop so that they understand district performance throughout the year. In that way, DOs would develop strategies on how to support schools. DD2 also described how she conducted accountability sessions with the DOs. She indicated that they could pose unanticipated questions that required details on a learner's performance per subject. This is how she expressed herself;

*Our school in term one, this is where you are, when you are doing the accounting sessions. In term two, what makes you think that in term three, you will improve? Your performance is not telling a story that says it is going to be a good story at the end of the year. Which subject is failing? I do the same with the facilitators. Sometimes it is shocking them because they least expect some of the questions that I would raise. And I am saying to them; if you do not know how many learners you have in your subject Tourism, how do you then begin to benchmark performance in your subject? How many schools are going to give you distinctions in your subject?*

*How many schools? How many schools are your worst performing schools? Calculate the total number of learners, in those schools that are going to give you results, versus the schools that are high risk. You can begin to see whether your subject would give me 80% and above. Because for Grade 12, no subject must – that is the target - no subject must perform below 80%. It is 80% and above. So, if you do not know how many learners, how do you calculate your percentage?*

She continued and further illustrated how she conducted accountability sessions with the circuit managers;

*In your secondary schools that you have, circuit manager, what is your contribution into that percentage that is expected of you? And if he says to me, my contribution is 89%, I am saying, what happens to the difference? Tell me that it is 100%, let me work from 100%, you know your realistic target. My next question is, which schools, which schools of all your schools? My next question is, which learners of the four schools?*

These two extracts seem to show that DD's involvement in accountability meetings on teaching and learning issues was important and could yield positive outcomes. This could be because a DD, as the head of the district, could hold leaders at all levels of the district, from the district office to schools. Furthermore, it emerged that, with accountability sessions, DOs were able to revisit the role of deputy principals. CLI1 shared how they were able to ascertain the role of deputy principals as curriculum drivers. She said: *And the reason why we came up with the deputy principals' meeting, we were asking, but what is the role of the deputy principal? As we go to schools, you could see they were confused.* Another participant noted the importance of appointing capable deputy principals. This is what she said: *In an appointment of a deputy principal; if I make a wrong appointment of a deputy principal, who is a curriculum driver in a school, what am I doing to curriculum delivery in a school? That is the bigger picture, CM2.* Participants also noted that from the engagements with the schools, they observed that the curriculum was not being managed well across grades in high schools as the focus was mainly on Grade 12. As a result, they came out with the idea of advising schools to have one deputy principal for lower grades and one for higher grades to ensure accountability and support across all grades. This is how DD1 explained;

*What we have done, you, we even now have sessions for, strictly deputy principals, who are curriculum drivers in the schools, to say, it is in your interest, one is for FET deputy principal, one must be for GET, so that they must protect their space in terms of what learners are supposed to be doing in schools. That is why we have taken that route as well. DD1*

Below is the extract from the meeting invitation that corroborated DOs accounts on the involvement of deputy principals in leading the curriculum.

- 1. Deputy Principals Meeting**  
Two Deputy Principals from all Schools must attend the meeting. One from GET and one from FET, if there is only one Deputy a HOD must represent the second Deputy.  
  
**Date:** 18 April 2017  
**Time:** 14:30  
**Venue:**
- 2. District Moderation/Verification – Annexure A**  
Attached is the District moderation schedule for Term 2.  
Schools must make available
  - o All learner portfolios for each grade
  - o Teachers' SBA file consisting of Working Mark sheet (electronic version – 2 copies), Internal Moderation and Cluster/Circuit Moderation tools (2 copies) SBA and the memorandum.

*Figure 6.5: Extract from the invitation to an accountability meeting*

Some participants shared how accountability sessions with schools help identify challenges that high school learners face due to a lack of understanding of concepts emanating from primary schools. CM1's account exemplifies this;

*Because we say to high schools, check your feeders that are coming, check their learners, if you are having a problem with Maths, check these learners, where do they come from? Then by so doing, we are going to have a link to say, okay this school is having a problem with Maths. Then we address it with the GET facilitators to say; we are having a challenge with this, we are having a challenge with this school, this school is doing well. Then that is how they share their ideas. As we do accounting sessions, some of the high schools manage to detect a problem and identify primary schools, to say that learners coming from here are like this. And then we will address the problems with a particular school.*

Overall, this theme suggests that accountability meetings between DOs and SMTs help DOs improve teaching and learning in all schools. It also emerged that with these accountability sessions, DOs can have a broader understanding of the performance of their schools and can

make informed decisions on how to provide the necessary support. Having these meetings also enhanced the management structure of the SMTs in that Deputy Principals (DPs) were able to refine their roles in teaching and learning in their schools. These sessions seemed to assist high schools to detect curriculum-related gaps that emanated from primary schools. In that way, DOs managed to intervene to support those primary schools. The following theme deliberates on how DOs provided professional development to support teaching and learning.

## **6.8 Providing professional development for teachers, SMTs, principals and DOs**

One of the leadership practices that DOs viewed as vital in supporting teaching and learning was developing the capacity for DOs and school personnel. Participants believed that to realise their goal of improving learner performance, capacity building of teachers, SMTs, principals, and DOs was imperative. DOs used a multi-pronged approach to professional development. They believed that it was essential to develop DOs so that they would be able to develop school personnel. DD1 noted: *We have a strategy to develop internal staff. Because we believe that we cannot send people out there, not knowing what to do, right. So, we are focusing on staff, developing our own people.* CLI shared a similar view and specified that only subject advisors received capacity building: *We must do capacity building for subject advisors. Because we do not want to throw our people at the deep end, we have to capacitate them first.*

Most participants further shared their understanding of the importance of the professional development of HoDs. They believed that HoDs are in the coalface of supporting teachers and monitoring teaching and learning, but DOs believed that HoDs seemed inadequate on their daily activity of supporting teaching and learning. This is what CLI2 had to say;

*This current year, we have a year for HoDs because we realised that they are like our weakest link. Like when you go to schools, you will find HoDs say, can you please attend that teacher, and so on and so on. So, we have a year of the HoD, to empower them*

CM2 shared the same view on the lack of capacity on HoDs;

*This year, we are focusing on training an HoD on how to manage teaching and learning, how they should monitor and support teachers. Because we have realised that the curriculum is not managed by HoDs.*

The District Director, DD1, described the importance of capacity development for teachers and HoDs. He believed that by focusing on teachers and HoDs, his focus is on the classroom where teaching and learning is taking place. This what he said;

*But then we have got quarterly training programs for our teachers and HoDs on content coverage, you know. So, when you talk of quality, I am focusing on what is happening in the classroom.*

It emerged from the DOs that professional development was also done through the induction of newly appointed personnel, including teachers, SMTs and principals. DCLI1 shared his experience;

*At the beginning of the year, we identify novice educators and who's new in the subject and then they will target those educators specifically as well. We also have sessions with newly appointed HoDs and SMTs.*

CLI1 shared their perspective on the need for the DOs to provide induction programmes for novice teachers. They explained;

*We are saying; we are going to concentrate on the novice teachers. These are the teachers that, sometimes we forget because when you call a group of teachers, thirty teachers, some teachers, you find that, you know, they are there, they are just, you know, talking and all that. Now we forget about this. We orientate new teachers on CAPS, content training, teaching methodologies and all that.*

CLI2 shared similar sentiments on the induction of teachers. She further indicated that these induction programmes are done on a termly basis for both teachers and SMTs as well as subject advisors. CLI2 explained:

*We ensure that like, every term, there are new appointments, we ensure that we induct our subject advisors, school leadership teams and Educators on what are the expectations for the term so that they can know. We take them on a term basis. And then, we also have these support sessions for SMTs and then support sessions for staff.*



From the district directors' perspective, districts had mentorship programmes for principals experiencing difficulties in leading and managing their schools. They assigned other principals as mentors to these principals. DD1 and DD2 explained;

*I have principals whom I know that those ones are struggling. Then I have appointed mentors for them, be with them, and make sure that they come in once a week. And it was negotiated because the staff must also understand that I am bringing in a mentor, not because the principal is useless, but I am bringing another layer of support, you know. DD1*

*Underperforming principals. It is either we put those principals under mentorship, on-site or in another school and place a person that would manage the school for the duration. So, we give them support. As a strategy, we have monthly sessions with principals. DD2*

While on mentorship for principals, DD1 shared another strategy that mainly focused on weekly planning for activities that pertain to day-to-day activities. He explained;

*What we do is, we have termed it, one plus four (1+4) at 2 o'clock. We are saying, once a week at 14H00, né, on Thursday, we need to discuss and give support on activities for the following week, so from 2 o'clock to 5 o'clock, we sit with those principals we are supporting, to say, these are the activities for the following week, where are your challenges, how do we support you? So, that at least, they go into the next week knowing exactly, to say, these are the things that is going to happen. In that, we are able to cover as many principals through that particular format.*

Data also revealed that DOs fostered conditions that supported collaboration among subject advisors, teachers, and SMTs. This was done by providing settings that allowed for information sharing and collective problem-solving curriculum-related issues as well as management-related challenges. DD1 had this to say;

*We have established what we call a community of learning, you know, where we have grouped people with the same skills, you know, to say, let them work hand-in-hand and support each other, you know. So, we have got learning groups that we have established so that we do not find our facilitator being exposed alone, you know. So, when we hold workshops, for example, we try and sell them, ja.*

DD2 elaborated on how teachers and subject advisors collaborated and shared expertise among themselves in the PLCs. She elaborated;

*We also have our own PLGs, Professional Learning Groups. In other words, it is Maths teachers together, and it is Life Science teachers together with the facilitator. What happens with the teachers also happens with the facilitators; they also have provincially their own PLGs, or PLCs, you know, Professional Learning Communities. We have subject information sharing meetings. Okay, so we are reflecting, subject information sharing meetings, it is cluster meetings. But that is the way each and every subject advisor, for example, a Maths subject advisor's meeting his or her teachers.*

Two other DOs shared consistent views on collaboration among teachers and SMTs. This is what they said: *We have the professional learning groups of teachers that are dealing, you know, sharing practice, sharing how they approach the different aspects of the subject DCLI1.* CM2 indicated: *But at the circuit level, circuits have Communities of Practice, and Communities of Practice are used to share skills, you know, to transfer skills among teachers and SMTs.* DOs responsible for curriculum support appeared to be receiving support by collaborating with the provincial head office's curriculum structures. DCLI1 stated: *We have developmental sessions, for instance, workshops, we call it subject information-sharing meetings, where subject advisors go once every month, they go to Head Office, and there they get important information.* Participants highlighted that these forums support subject advisors on content-related issues. CLI2 summarised how CIF (Curriculum Information Forum) supported DOs:

*The CIF is the Curriculum Information Forum; it is led by the Coordinators from Head Office. They are the ones who meet with us, all facilitators and DCEs, from the fifteen districts in the province. We will talk issues of the curriculum, what is it that we need to do to improve. So, we meet once a term. There are no other issues, we just talk about subject-specific issues, for example, we have issues like, teachers cannot do tessellations in Mathematics, let us talk as a province in the subject, what can we do? What are you doing? And then we share good practices and so on and so on.*

All extracts in this theme seem to highlight the importance of developing the capacity of SMTs as well as DOs so that teaching and learning can improve. It emerged that HoDs are key in ensuring that teaching and learning in schools is monitored and teachers are supported. Collaboration through PLCs by teachers and subject advisors appeared to be helping districts to support teaching and learning subject and content related sharing meetings. Induction of newly appointed personnel from schools, including principals, emerged from DOs' accounts. Another leadership practice that DOs could use to enhance teaching and learning that also emerged was the mentorship of principals experiencing challenges regarding their role in managing teaching and learning. While DOs used their strategies to develop the capacity of teachers, SMTs and DOs, initiatives from the provincial head office and external provincial funded agencies strengthened the capacity of these individuals. The literature review showed that if districts invest in professional development, teaching and learning in schools improve (Bantwini, 2012; Fullan, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Levin et al., 2012). PLCs also emerged in the literature as key in sustaining teaching and learning improvement (DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Honig & Copland, 2014; Horton & Martin, 2013). The culture of collaboration between DOs and school personnel came out as important (Leithwood & Louis, 2012; Knapp et al., 2014).

## **6.9 Conclusion**

In the preceding discussion, district leadership practices in support of teaching and learning within both districts yielded similar results. Participants regarded the use of data as of great importance to strategically support teaching and learning. It emerged that DOs used technological data management systems (DDD). This ensured the accessibility of data to all levels of the department. DDD also facilitated the use and management of different types of data in collecting, storing, disseminating, and accessing school and student-related data. However, it also emerged that principals were not well capacitated on using data to inform their leadership practices effectively. It also emerged that district officials differentiated support by prioritising resources for schools from impoverished communities to bridge the gap between these schools and affluent schools. Overall, there seems to be a noticeable consistency between what DOs believed to be their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning and their leadership practices. The DOs' belief that they are target driven and learner assessment-driven resonates with their leadership practice of data use.

Another finding that emerged is the importance of provincial leader involvement in the pursuit of improving teaching and learning. Additionally, it emerged that when provincial leaders provide a curriculum framework for monitoring and supporting teaching and learning, this facilitates DOs involvement in supporting schools. This shows that; the involvement of the MEC, provincial leadership and other provincial funded agencies could be an advantage to enhance DOs leadership practices of supporting teaching and learning. Visibility and accessibility of DOs in schools and communities also came out as leverage that enhanced communication and buy-in by school personnel, parents and community stakeholders. Visibility also assisted DOs to monitor and supporting teachers and principals continuously. In that way, DOs visibility also promoted shared accountability among DOs, schools, and communities. This indicates that; district officials' hands-on approach can enhance teaching and learning.

There is also a general agreement that developing the capacity of SMTs as well as DOs enhances teaching and learning. Furthermore, collaboration and professional learning through PLCs by teachers and subject advisors appeared to be helping districts to support teaching and learning subject and content related sharing meetings. Developing induction programmes of newly appointed school personnel, including principals, emerged from DOs accounts. Notably, district officials supported and mentored principals who experienced challenges. The following chapter summarises the study's major findings and presents conclusions and lessons learned from the study.

## CHAPTER SEVEN

### LESSONS FROM MY RESEARCH JOURNEY

*I used to think that the school was the primary unit of educational change, and the literature repeatedly insists that it is. However, I am now persuaded that we cannot save education one school at a time. Excellent schools in poor districts implode over time, whereas poor schools in excellent districts get better. (Lambert, 2003, p. 30)*

#### 7.1 Introduction

This study sought to explore the leadership role of district officials in supporting teaching and learning as understood by officials in two district offices in one selected province of South Africa. As the above quote postulates, the intention of this study was not to suggest that district office leadership is the panacea for teaching and learning improvement. I conceived the study based on my assumption, with which literature corroborated that, while some schools can sustain improvement through school-level leadership, district leadership is vital. This is vital in ensuring that there is a district-wide improvement that could be sustainable across all schools. However, district leadership as middle leadership is underestimated, while DOs play this crucial role in improving learning outcomes. I therefore regarded district leadership as important because schools are embedded within the districts. District officials should give support to principals, SMTs and teachers. Focusing on district leadership could enhance school improvement because focusing on one district is implicitly focusing on all schools within that district, both good performing and poorly performing schools. This chapter is three-fold. It firstly presents a run-through of the research journey through the chapters. Secondly, it provides a summary of findings by offering an account of emerging issues while connecting these with literature and the theoretical framework. Subsequently, I develop an emergent model which then leads to lessons that we can learn from the study. I end this chapter with concluding remarks. The research questions were:

1. How do education DOs understand their leadership role of supporting teaching and learning?
2. How do education DOs experience practising their leadership role in seeking to support teaching and learning?
3. What can we learn from the district leadership role that supports teaching and learning?

## **7.2 Summary of the research journey**

In Chapter 1, I presented the context of the problem with the intention of identifying the knowledge gap. I began by providing the orientation, which included background, statement of the problem, research purpose and related concepts for the study. It emerged in the historical background that the transition from the apartheid era to democratic SA had changed the policy context in education, which subsequently influenced educational leadership across the system. While there are over two decades of democracy, learners from communities that were formerly marginalised are still performing poorly, which further perpetuates performance achievement gaps. Like other countries, the focus of reforms has been on decentralisation that left individual schools to improve themselves through focusing on SBM. It is then no surprise that research also swayed to focus on school-level leadership, which unfortunately resulted in “isolated islands of excellence” (Elmore, 2003, p. 1). With decentralisation, districts have been seen as unimportant in the improvement of quality education (Narsee, 2006; Fleisch, 2006; Marzano & Waters, 2009). Accordingly, there are not enough studies in SA on the role of district officials in supporting schools. Furthermore, intermittent educational leadership studies highlight what is usually not going right in the district (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017), resulting in inconsistent learning outcomes that are not sustainable (Fullan, 2007; Harris, 2010; Sharrat & Fullan, 2009). Furthermore, while district officials are a valuable resource, potentially, there seems to be a lack of knowledge about how DOs function and how they organise themselves to support schools. I therefore viewed district officials as a potential resource that has been neglected. This motivated this study to explore district officials’ understanding of their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning.

Chapter 2 provided a discussion of conceptual and empirical issues that are pertinent to the district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. The literature review provided insights regarding the understanding of DOs about their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning, which suggested a significant gap in the development of the district leadership phenomenon. While it pointed to the critical leadership role DOs could play in supporting teaching and learning, the literature indicated that the essential role that DOs can play is often ignored in research studies. I argued that this creates a void in understanding the potential leadership role that DOs could play in enhancing improvement in schools. Literature suggests that the role of district officials involves, firstly, setting the vision and goals for teaching and learning.

Furthermore, DOs should provide professional development for school leaders and teachers. DOs should also use evidence to provide targeted support to schools (Leithwood, 2010; Anderson et al., 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Dufour & Marzano, 2011). I then discussed conceptual and empirical discussion on the core practices DOs enact to support teaching and learning in Section 2.5. Practices included establishing and communicating a district vision, which includes setting goals and targets; this came out as necessary in improving teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). In addition, strategies included data-informed decision making, developing a collaborative culture and professional learning for teachers and leaders, and fostering district and community partnerships emerged as essential leadership practices that enhanced teaching and learning (Marzano & Waters, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015). In the literature review, I also highlighted some challenges that DOs experienced while attempting to support teaching and learning. Participants also generally agreed that the district leadership role in supporting schools had been neglected (Sharrat & Fullan, 2009; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017). In addition, South African studies reveal that schools experience insignificant support from DOs; hence, there is some gap in the literature on a district leadership role, which then informed the need of this study (Bhengu et al., 2014; Bantwini & Moorosi, 2017).

The issues that I discussed in the literature review suggest that the district office leadership is a complex and multifaceted phenomenon operating in a complex setting, comprising many interdependent elements with complex and adaptive challenges (Scott, 2003). For this reason, I positioned this study in a three-pronged theoretical framework. The first theory posits districts as open social systems, which comprise a set of interrelated and interdependent elements; that is, a change in one element affects other elements (Scott, 2003; Owens & Valesky, 2007; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; Senge et al., 2012). Such interdependency and interrelatedness of the sub-sections within the district offices and the diverse system of schools must be aligned to achieve a moral purpose of quality education for all learners (Scott, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2008; UNESCO, 2014). Of interest in this theory is the recognition of the permeability of the boundaries of organisations (Scott, 2003). While the open social systems theory was relevant for this study, its limitation is the abstract nature of the elements and the environment. I then adopted the PELP Framework because this theory is explicit on the basic core of district officials, i.e., instructional core. It is also specific on interdependent elements and environmental elements that could impact district leadership practices that support instructional core (Childress et al., 2006; Childress et al., 2007;). I also used Heifetz's model

of adaptive leadership. Two distinctions frame Heifetz's theory of adaptive leadership Heifetz et al., 2009; Linsky & Lawrence, 2011). Firstly, the distinction between technical and adaptive problems and the distinction between leadership and authority are discussed in Section 3.4. This theory also posited adaptive leadership as a collective leadership activity in which formal and informal leaders face technical and adaptive challenges.

I then moved on to examine the research design and methodology of the study. Informed by the constructivist paradigm, I adopted a collective case study approach that sought to understand the phenomenon of DO's leadership role in supporting teaching and learning. I studied the experiences of purposefully sampled eight district officials who were in the DMT of two districts in one selected province of SA. I employed in-depth face-to-face semi-structured interviews as the primary data generation method which was supplemented by document review and field observations that I presented and discussed in Chapters 5 and 6. In Chapter 5, I focused on the understanding of DOs regarding their leadership, while in Chapter 6, I dwelt on the leadership practices that support teaching and learning; however, there were overlaps in these chapters. It emerged in Chapter 5 that DOs shared some beliefs regarding their leadership role while acknowledging some enablers and constraints. Subsequently, the following section discusses overarching findings that emanated from these two chapters. I integrated these findings with conclusions.

### **7.3. Overarching findings and conclusions**

In this section, I categorise the findings into three categories. Namely, District shared beliefs; District practices, and Constraints. To develop these findings, I decided to integrate each overarching finding with conclusions to avoid repetition.

#### **7.3.1 District Officials' shared beliefs regarding the district leadership role**

In relation to the first research question, which sought to ascertain DOs' understanding of their role, findings revealed that DOs had shared beliefs regarding their role. These beliefs informed district officials' practices that support teaching and learning. DOs believed that their role was to promote quality teaching and learning. In this way, DOs regarded themselves as accountable for the performance of their respective districts, hence playing an important role in leading their district through developing the vision, goals and performance targets. This enabled DOs to organise themselves in their activities of supporting schools. Another prominent belief was DOs belief regarding the leadership of district directors and principals as key in ensuring that



DOs strategies for supporting schools became a reality. The next three sections discuss these shared beliefs.

### ***7.3.1.1 Promoting quality teaching and learning***

The first major finding of this study is that most DOs indicated that their primary role was to promote quality teaching and learning. Sharing a common belief regarding the understanding of quality teaching and learning is important within the district office as this is a foundation for developing DOs' district strategy for improving teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2015). This also enabled DOs to use common language amongst themselves and communities as well as when they communicate with schools in their attempts to support teachers and school leaders (Honig et al., 2010). However, Honig and Rainey (2015) contend that the extent to which this definition helps DOs depends partly on how DOs use it. DOs shared a multiplicity of views regarding how they conceptualised quality teaching and learning. The common thread in their beliefs included curriculum content coverage, teachers' content knowledge and quality assessments as important hallmarks for quality teaching and learning.

Another important issue that emerged is a link between quality teaching and learning with having skilled human resources in the district office and schools. DOs viewed their role as to ensure that learners were provided with learning opportunities and that; teachers are capacitated so that they can deliver the content (City et al., 2009; Childress et al., 2007). This is consistent with the literature. Studies by Honig (2012; see also, Honig & Rainey, 2015; Mavuso, 2013) found that when DOs seek to improve teaching and learning, they need to prioritise learner performance across all schools. However, this seems to be highly contested that it does not augur well with quality teaching and learning. Is quality equal to student performance based on assessments? Is it based on teachers completing the curriculum content? Alternatively, is it the acquisition of skills and values that are applicable outside schools and beyond years of schooling? Honig and Rainey (2015) contend that preparing students to be capable citizens in this era of globalisation is deep learning that moves beyond assessing content areas equipping learners with skills such as critical thinking, problem-solving, collaboration and self-learning.

Moreover, quality teaching and learning should also focus on teachers' pedagogical practices, not only on technical aspects of teaching and learning, which focuses on content and assessments (Elmore, 2000). While there are these contentions, the prerequisite for supporting teaching and learning appears to be a clear definition of what quality teachers mean for DOs in

their efforts of improving learning outcomes for learners. This is because how they define teaching and learning may influence their beliefs on how they perform the task of supporting schools.

### ***7.3.1.2 Cultivating a culture of shared responsibility and accountability with district directors and school principals as key***

Shifting the organisation's culture, that is, norms, beliefs and behaviours, influences the way of doing business, which also characterises education organisations in this era of adaptive challenges that face education (Heifetz et al., 2009). Childress et al. (2007) regard this as one of the most essential whilst the most difficult aspects of the school district. The story of DOs reveals that education districts can dramatically shift their culture and the way of doing business to collectively work with schools and communities to improve performance across all schools, irrespective of socio-economic backgrounds. A notable hallmark that emerged was the firm belief by DOs about their responsibility and accountability for learner performance. This is consistent with prior research by Waters and Marzano (2006; see also Honig, 2012; Leithwood & Louis, 2012) that emphasises district leadership as central to improving learner performance, especially for narrowing achievement gaps across all schools.

Moreover, acknowledgement of viewing the District Director and principals as vital in ensuring that district strategic plans and goals were realised emerged strongly from the district officials. Notably, the district director plays an enormous role in influencing district shared beliefs. This was evident in the way DOs emulated what district directors believed regarding district leadership roles. It was also evident in the language that DOs used in my interactions with them, which mostly echoed district directors' beliefs. DOs reported that their role was to provide direction and guidance to give support to schools by giving regular feedback to school management teams and, more frequently, to principals. Even though DOs through setting targets and goals for learner success, school-level factors tend to have powerful influences on teaching and learning (Honig & Rainey, 2015). As a result, principals are seen to be important in driving DOs strategies of supporting teaching and learning (Bhengu et al., 2014; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Supovitz, 2006; Naicker et al., 2013). The PELP Framework suggests that district officials need to realign their structures such that it is clear how the work of the district gets done, how people are organised and who has responsibility and accountability for results (Childress et al., 2007). What appears in this discussion is the DOs belief that while there was

shared responsibility for learner performance between district offices and schools, district directors and principals were linchpins in DOs strategies for supporting schools.

### ***7.3.1.3 Develop and communicate vision, goals, and targets for learner performance***

DOs regarded themselves as accountable for learner performance; hence, their role was to establish district-wide vision, goals, and targets for learner performance, informing their improvement strategies for teaching and learning. While they believed that school-based leadership was crucial, DOs believed that their role was to set district goals. DOs believed that their vision for teaching and learning was target-driven as well as evidence-based. Thus, by defining goals to be shared across the districts, DOs fostered district cultures that shaped and influenced their support for teaching and learning to enhance large-scale improvement (Fullan, 2009; Leithwood & Louis, 2012;).

Furthermore, strategic planning appeared to be fundamental to establishing shared accountability among district officials and principals on collectively agreed goals of improving teaching and learning. Because of the adaptive nature of quality teaching and learning that would ensure that all students achieve, DOs need to engage all stakeholders in the process to focus on delivering content (Elmore, 2000). It appeared that DOs developed shared visions and goals for their district by involving schools and other stakeholders. It is also notable that DOs also had yearly mottos, which were informed by what they deemed relevant to their context. For example, CLI2 articulated District 2 slogan that they constantly share with schools as ‘together we can make it’.

From this overarching theme, there is a common thread throughout regarding DOs understanding of their role in supporting teaching and learning, which underlines the benefits of DOs deliberate focus of their energy in the endeavours of supporting teaching and learning. This common thread is the explicit focus of DOs on developing and implementing a widely shared vision and goals that focus on improving learner performance. It appears that DOs established an ongoing theory of action and strategic thinking in both districts, which they communicated consistently to schools. Hence, I conclude that DOs who regard a district office as a unit of quality teaching and learning through developing goals and setting targets for all schools will be able to share their ambitions with schools and stakeholders effectively. While DOs shared this belief, it came out that district directors and principals were key in driving DOs strategies. The conclusion that can be drawn from this finding is that when the district director builds a shared philosophy and capability with other DOs and principals to enhance

teaching and learning, these influences buy-in from schools and other stakeholders. This could consequently inform DOs practices of supporting teaching and learning, which follow in the next section.

### **7.3.2 District leadership practices that focus on teaching and learning**

The second research question sought to ascertain district leadership practices that supported teaching and learning. As DOs gave accounts about their leadership practices, which were also complemented by documents review and observations, it emerged that DOs supported teaching and learning through a multiplicity of strategies. Dos' approaches were differentiated according to the specific needs of schools, primarily focusing on schools that were performing poorly. However, they noted that they also made efforts to ensure that school that were performing well sustained their performance. This shows that while it is important that DOs differentiate support according to school needs, DOs need to implement integration strategies that bring coherence into all schools. Schools that were performing according to set targets developed their strategies; however, they also accounted for their performance on a termly basis. This would lead to optimum performance according to the set targets for all schools (Childress et al., 2007; Anderson et al., 2012). Dos' interventions to schools were context-specific in that they looked at specific needs of schools. They also supported schools across all grades throughout the year, mainly quarterly. Literature suggests that successful district offices use multiple strategies to mobilise and support large-scale improvement; however, the impact of these strategies is positive if they are coordinated in sync and not in isolation (Anderson, 2003; Togneri & Anderson, 2003; Childress et al., 2007; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Honig & Rainey, 2015; Sharrat & Fullan, 2009). In developing strategies to support schools, DOs employed multiple practices using different strategies that helped them organise themselves to support teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2007). These included data-informed shared accountability and support meetings, effective communication, DOs hands-on approach through visibility and accessibility in schools and communities, and providing professional learning for principals, HODs and teachers.

#### ***7.3.2.1 Data-informed shared accountability and support meetings***

DOs regarded their role as providing direction and guidance to principals and other school personnel and motivating and supporting schools. In that connection, DOs in both districts used data that included assessment data, content coverage, content-related information, teacher and learner absenteeism. They also held accountability and data-based support sessions within the

districts with the district director and with school principals, informed by learner performance across all grades. DOs used technological data systems DDD as well as traditional tools for collecting, storing, accessing, and accounting for teaching and learning-related data. By using technology, they managed to collect, examine, and analyse data to set goals and develop improvement plans that were differentiated according to the needs of individual schools. With these, DOs had continuous accountability sessions and data conversations with DOs and principals and DPs and HODs. The use of DDD ensured real-time accessibility to all levels in the district and to account for all stakeholders. The conclusion that can be made in this finding is the need for DOs to shift from data gathering for school compliance only to building a widely shared capacity using accountability and support meetings that enhance teaching and learning (Datnow et al., 2007; Honig & Rainey, 2015).

DOs did not use data superficially; they went deeper to interpret data by looking at some variables that could influence learner performance. For example, DOs looked at subject knowledge for teachers, about concepts that teachers may have had challenges with and time on task for both teachers and learners, by looking at absenteeism for both teachers and learners, acknowledging that time on task meant actual teaching. Seemingly, DOs used the balcony perspective by observing, interpreting and making judgements about interventions that need to be undertaken (Heifetz et al., 2009). They were also able to see and assess gaps between set targets and current performance, leading to guided decisions on how to intervene (Heifetz & Linsky, 2002; Nicolaides & McCallum, 2013). While there was this shift, some DOs shared their concerns regarding principals' capacity of using data for their improvement efforts. A related conclusion is that; establishing a culture of data use for shared accountability between schools and district offices requires DOs to capacitate principals, who would then help teachers and SMTs make effective use of data in school level instructional practices. Mutual understanding of the purpose of data use and making clear expectations for data-based decision-making between schools and districts is also important.

#### ***7.3.2.2 Effective communication as key***

It emerged from the findings that DOs underscored the importance of open and regular communication with schools and communities by articulating the district's needs to enhance buy-in and support from the community and schools. They noted that providing open, clear lines of communication between principals and districts is essential to promote a professional community that is required to support teaching and learning improvement. DOs with the

leadership of the district director also used different tools to facilitate the provision of immediate and meaningful communication to feedback to principals, schools, stakeholders, and communities. The tools included traditional tools such as departmental circulars and technology, e.g., the use of social media such as WhatsApp, to communicate (see Section 5.5). This corroborates the research suggesting that social media provides school district leaders with many possibilities to share their district's endeavours to regularly support teaching and learning with stakeholders (Cox, 2012). This relates to the above conclusion; see Section 7.3.1, which indicates that district director leadership enhances teaching and learning and influences district partnerships with schools and other stakeholders.

### ***7.3.2.3 District Officials' visibility and accessibility in schools and communities***

Visibility and accessibility of DOs in schools and communities came out as leverage that enhanced communication and buy-in by school personnel, parents and community stakeholders. DOs were visible to support schools and to monitor performance schools; they were working towards achieving the set targets. This is elaborated further in Section 6.5. DOs had meetings with principals and SMTs every term to ensure that schools were performing towards set targets for the year. Another hallmark is how DOs conceptualised their stakeholders broadly beyond district boundaries by involving community leaders outside districts. When faced with adaptive challenges, dependency on authority does not work well. Adaptive leadership posits that while authority is crucial as a tool for strategic work, leaders need to mobilise communities for adaptive work (Heifetz et al., 2009). Dos' accounts showed that they were able to get support from political leaders, SGBs, curriculum-related partners, namely, book publishers, parents, and church-based organisations. DOs seemed to have harnessed the power of the community by forging district community partnerships. Open systems theory stresses the importance of the environment, which has permeable and intrusive boundaries due to the loosely coupled nature of the district (Scott, 2003; Hoy & Miskel, 2008). The primary conclusion that I can draw is that if districts are permeable and engaging, they could draw resources from the environment that supports their strategies. By involving stakeholders, they proactively build and maintain healthy relationships with parents and the community to support their strategies.

### ***7.3.2.4 Providing professional development for principals, HODs and teachers***

For their efforts to improve teaching and learning, DOs enhanced school-based personnel members through professional learning by induction and mentoring programmes and fostering

collaborative cultures through professional learning communities (PLCs). They also provided professional development opportunities for teachers and principals. However, DOs from the two district offices also used different strategies that were unique in their respective districts. For example, District 2 used a different approach of supporting principals through what district director, DD1, termed ‘one plus four’, whereby time was allocated once a week in the afternoons to support principals who had leadership challenges; more discussion is in Section 6.8. District 2 had a different approach of assigning another principal to mentor principals who had challenges. Both district offices seemed to have invested in the professional development of teachers and principals. PELP Framework regards people skills and knowledge as crucial to successfully implementing the strategies of improving teaching and learning (Childress et al., 2007). Through PLCs, professional relationships between subject advisors and teachers came out as another strategy for DOs. Establishing purposeful relationships seemed to have been the deliberate practice for DOs in this study. I, therefore, conclude that when leadership practices focus on collaborative relationships among teachers and principals to improve their practices learning outcomes improve.

#### ***7.3.2.5 Provincial head office as an enabler***

While DOs developed their local strategic initiatives, they acknowledged helpful enablers and constraints that would be imposed by the context in which they worked. Enablers involved, firstly, the MEC’s strategic framework that included hallmarks that assisted them when developing their strategies for supporting schools. Furthermore, provincial intervention programmes, namely, curriculum support SSIP, which is the intervention to Grade 12 learners for schools that did not perform according to targets set the previous year. Also, the curriculum management framework, SWSIS, helped DOs in their attempts to support school across all grades. The provincial curriculum directorate had curriculum forums every term that supported district curriculum leaders wherein subject advisors across the province collaborated and supported each other on curriculum-related challenges. Also, provincial offices provided physical resources, for example, laptops and cars for DOs and availability of ICT for schools which assisted DOs in their strategies of supporting schools. What emerges in this issue is that the head office could also expand professional development opportunities through provincial support structures that focused on teaching and learning and professional learning for district officials.

### **7.3.3 Constraints that District officials faced**

According to the PELP Framework, district leaders can achieve coherence if they are aware of forces in the environment that could hurt the enactment of the strategy (Childress et al., 2007). Embracing the notion of viewing districts as open social systems is to “acknowledge that districts are penetrated by their environments in ways that blur and confound any simple criterion for distinguishing one from the other” (Scott, 2003, p. 186). While there were positive strides in the way DOs had organised themselves to support teaching and learning, there seemed to have been some challenges that frustrated their efforts. Firstly, insufficient capacity seems to have been a significant barrier. Capacity gaps included subject advisors lacking some capacity to support teachers. However, DOs tried to mitigate this challenge by using provincial curriculum support teams whereby subject advisors received support from the provincial office. Furthermore, there was a collaboration between subject advisors and teachers where they shared expertise. The second challenge DOs reported was insufficient leadership capacity for principals in that it frustrated DOs attempts of improving teaching and learning. One district director attributed this challenge to policy issues, wherein principals were not accountable for their performance through signing performance agreements. This corroborates Twalo (2017) research, which found that DOs lacked explicit authority over schools as they do not have jurisdiction over managing poor-performing principals and teachers. More discussion is in Section 2.6. DOs could adapt to this challenge by assigning mentors and collaborative settings where principals could support each other and also receive support from circuit managers.

Thirdly, even though they regarded support from the head office as enabling, DOs also reported that the head office frustrated their efforts of supporting schools. This was due to frequent and unplanned initiatives and interventions from the provincial office and too many meetings that the provincial office convened. DOs regarded these as resulting in competing priorities hence hindering their strategies. This is consistent with a research study conducted by Twalo (2017) which found that the uncoordinated planning between the district offices and provincial offices stifled DOs attempts of supporting schools. This study reported that this provincial office intermittently imposed intervention plans that could not be integrated well with their district plans (Twalo, 2017). It also appeared in this study that there was no alignment between the operational planning of district offices and the head office because of uncoordinated planning. Seemingly, the absence of coordination between the district offices and provincial offices can impede DOs strategies of supporting schools as seemingly; provincial intervention plans



potentially take precedence over district plans (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Narsee, 2006;).

Furthermore, the provincial office's provision of resources and professional support has enhanced DOs leadership endeavours to support schools. The involvement of the MEC through developing the pillars as a framework for the province also appeared to have been a great influence. On the contrary, competition and lack of coordination within the district office as well as between head office and district offices appear to have impeded DOs attempts to support schools. One can conclude that while the head office may have good intentions to support districts, DOs may perceive head office actions to be in conflict with their daily operations with regards to time and support. Therefore, I suggest that provincial and district plans need to be aligned. However, this could be possible if both levels develop and communicate their planning on time. Furthermore, there is a need for alignment of district structure and provincial structure to avert competition and lack of coordination between districts and the head office.

Lastly, it emerged that while DOs managed to garner support from other stakeholders, they seem not to have been able to garner support from unions. DOs regarded unions as a constraint and not a useful stakeholder in that unions interfered in their strategies, including setting common tests for learners, observing teachers in the classrooms and on promotion post recruitments. This is consistent with literature that shows that political involvement of unions in education seems to be a challenge internationally and in SA (Knapp et al., 2014; Msila, 2014). There seems to be a need for further studies on how DOs could diverge from inactive engagement with teacher unions to building creative relationships while not losing sight of the vision and goals of education. More discussion is in Section 6.6.

#### **7.4 District officials' leadership role for supporting teaching and learning - Lessons learnt**

The primary purpose of this collective case study was to get insights into district officials' leadership role in supporting teaching and learning as practised by DOs of two education districts in one province. Building on the findings and overarching themes from DOs, this collective case study identified four overarching themes which are presented in Section 7.3. The first lesson relates to DOs' shared philosophy, defining quality teaching and learning and the district's shared responsibility and accountability. The second lesson is the district's strategy for supporting teaching and learning. The third lesson entails the structure and systems that may inform and is informed by the multi-pronged approach district leadership practices.

This means that through having a shared philosophy and shared responsibility and accountability, a district develops and effectively communicates its vision and goals for learner performance, which will, in turn, be translated into action by establishing systems and structures that will enable and influence DOs leadership practices. This could then result in sustained district-wide improvement of teaching and learning. However, there would be constraints that may hinder DOs efforts. Table 7.1 below shows overarching findings of district leadership lessons through which this study extends knowledge. Subsequently, Figure 7.1 shows an emergent model, District Leadership for Teaching and Learning, which illustrates a graphical representation of the lessons. This model includes interdependent elements and depicts relationships among these elements.

*Table 7.1: Lessons from findings*

	Overarching findings	Research question 3: What can we learn from the district leadership role that supports teaching and learning?
Research question 1:  How do education DOs understand as their leadership role in supporting teaching and learning?	1. Promoting quality teaching and learning	District officials’ shared philosophy:
	2. Cultivating a culture of shared responsibility and accountability with district directors and principals as key	1. Define teaching and learning for shared understanding 2. District shared responsibility and accountability for learner performance
Research question 2:  How do education DOs experience practising their leadership role in seeking to support teaching and learning?	1. Develop and communicate vision, goals, and targets for learner performance	Defines and communicate strategy by establishing and communicating vision, goals, and targets
	2. Data-informed shared accountability and support meetings	Practising teaching and learning orientated leadership through enabling:  1. Structure and systems 2. District leadership functions
	3. Effective communication as key	
	4. District Officials’ visibility and accessibility in schools and communities	
	5. Providing professional development for principals, HODs and teachers	
	Constraints that hinder district officials leadership functions	

## DISTRICT LEADERSHIP FOR TEACHING AND LEARNING: EMERGENT MODEL

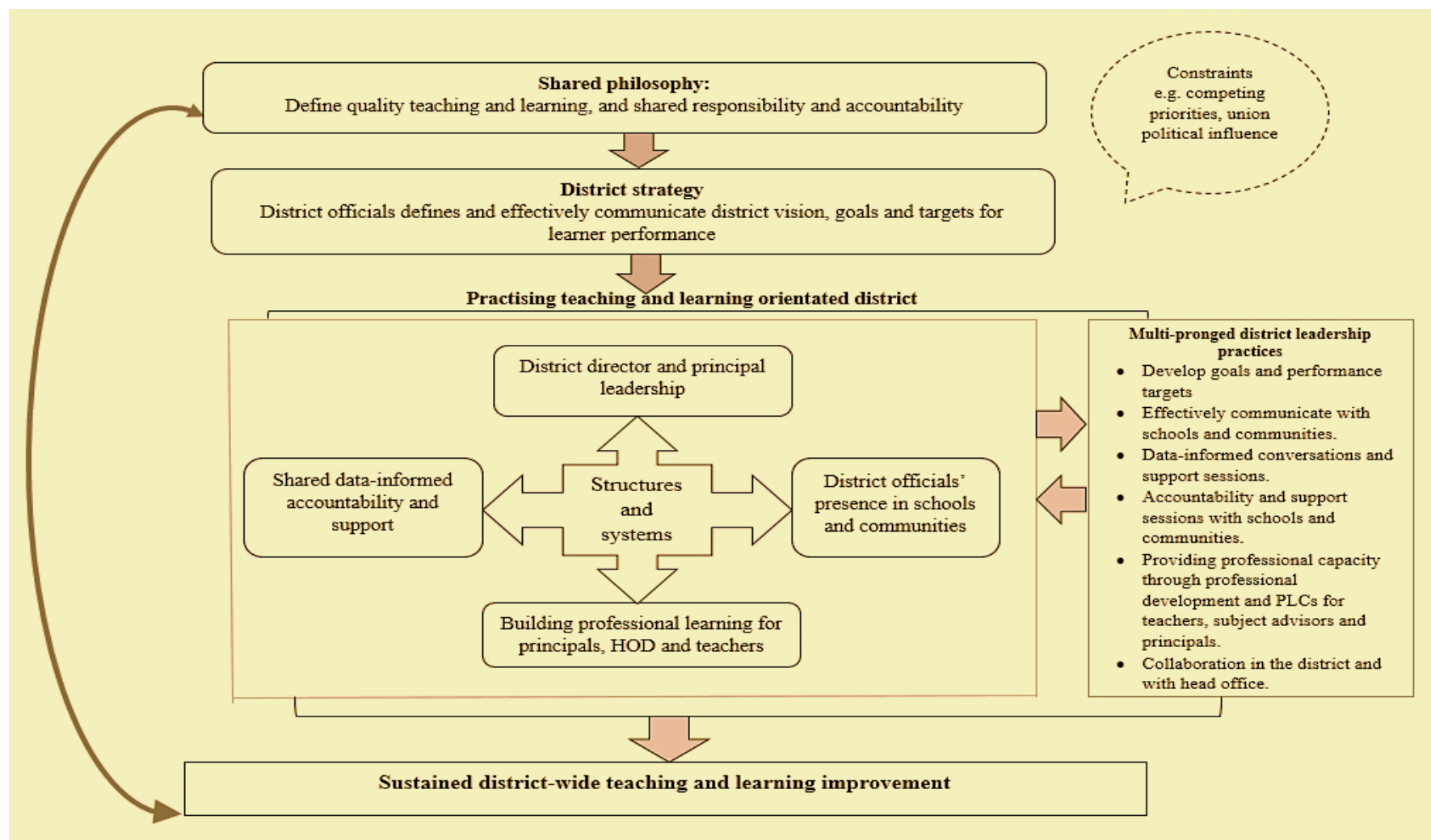


Figure 7.1: District leadership for teaching and learning model

#### **7.4.1 Defining teaching and learning and shared responsibility and accountability as a shared philosophy**

The first lesson from this study is that when DOs spend time in defining what quality teaching and learning mean for the district, they will have a common understanding. Consequently, DOs would share their definition with all schools and stakeholders. We are learning that embracing a specific, shared philosophy on what quality teaching and learning means is a vital step in DOs attempts to support teaching and learning. Consequently, DOs shared the belief that they were responsible and accountable for learner performance. In that way, they held themselves accountable to schools and stakeholders while making schools accountable. Hence, from a practice perspective, there is a need for DOs to reflect and deliberate on what quality teaching and learning mean for the district, which would then influence how they understand their role in supporting schools. Shared philosophy appears to be the compass and direction for DOs as this forms the foundation for developing the vision goals and targets for district improvement efforts. Below is a further discussion regarding this.

#### **7.4.2 District officials define and effectively communicate district vision, goals and targets for learner performance**

DOs' beliefs regarding quality teaching and learning appeared to align with how they developed a vision and goals for teaching and learning in their districts. This is evident in the way DOs in the leadership of district directors developed a vision, goals, and targets for the districts. A shared belief regarding their role and quality teaching and learning turned out to be a basis to strategically develop a district shared vision and goals, which then informed performance targets for schools, which were then communicated to schools and communities. I have learned that when DOs are proactive in their endeavours of supporting schools, it is incumbent upon them to develop visions and goals that are unique for their districts instead of relying on the provincial vision. This would then enhance their efforts by providing direction of where they want to be regarding learning outcomes for their district. Developing a vision and goals for the district and being able to communicate them to schools and communities effectively put them on a better footing of developing strategies that are informed by their vision and goals.

### **7.4.3 Practising teaching and learning orientated leadership**

Practising teaching and learning orientated leadership included structures and systems DOs used, which informed district leadership functions. Apparently, there was a shift from gathering data for compliance to building a widely shared accountability and support that enhance teaching and learning. A lesson is that, as a strategic asset to the district, data needs to be accessible, managed and utilised for the benefit of its stakeholders, including school personnel and parents and communities. It is important to establish strong systems and structures to ensure data is available throughout the organisation in real-time and to mine it to enhance student learning. DOs regularly analysed data containing information on students' academic performance, attendance patterns for teachers and learners, and even involvement with other stakeholders. They were persistent in examining data. They used data to drive ongoing interventions and share the performance results with schools, parents and other community leaders. However, it is important that school-level managers also use data for their instructional leadership. Hence, establishing a culture of data use requires leadership at the district office and schools, which would then help teachers make sense of and understand the purpose of data to enhance data-based decisions that will improve teachers' instructional practices. Therefore, DOs should equip principals and HODs with skills on how to use data for their school-level decision-making.

This study found that DOs' efforts for supporting teaching and learning included professional learning experiences for teachers, HODs, principals and subject advisors. This was done through professional development workshops and PLCs whereby there was sharing of learning experiences among teachers and between teachers and subject advisors. Also, principals shared opportunities for learning amongst each other and through professional development programmes facilitated by DOs. It also emerged that district officials were successful in fostering partnerships with schools, parents, and communities. It came out that DOs involved all stakeholders from the beginning of the year as they shared with them their strategic plans for the year. DOs were accountable to them every term by presenting how far they had worked towards achieving their performance targets. DOs managed to garner support by being accountable to the stakeholders. This shows that, by being visible and accessible through

communicating their goals and targets as well be accountable by communicating their progress regarding learner performance, DOs are proactive in involving stakeholders to support DOs strategies.

While DOs were at the forefront of ensuring that there was an improvement in their districts, they faced challenges that hindered their efforts. It appeared that DOs saw unions as interfering with the recruitment processes for principals, SMTs and DOs and impeding them from visiting teachers in their classrooms. Hence, I raised the question of whether the DOs understood education policies well. The NDP 2030 regards teacher unions as having undue influence on policy-related matters if the district officials lack knowledge of policies (NPC, 2013). Seemingly, DOs seemed not to have been able to address this challenge of capacity building for these officials. I have learned that; there is a dire need for district management to offer capacity building on education policies to avert unions being seen as barriers to the district's daily operations. While this is the case, these challenges never discouraged DOs from doing the best they could to support schools. They relied mostly on data as an asset they used to plan their support and accountability strategies with schools and communities. Another challenge was competing priorities that emanated because of imposed intervention programmes by the provincial head office and many provincial meetings that detached district directors from their planned activities in the district. The lesson regarding this challenge is that, while the head office may have good intentions to support districts, DOs may perceive head office actions to be in conflict with their daily operations with regards to time and support. Hence, there is a need to align district strategies with provincial strategic activities by collaborating during strategic planning.

Overall, as depicted by the model (See Figure 7.1 above), when DOs seek to support teaching and learning, it is necessary that they have a shared philosophy regarding how they conceptualise their role. Their shared philosophy would then lead to them developing meaningful strategies that seek to improve learner performance across the district. By having shared responsibility and accountability for goals and targets with schools, DOs set broad a plan of action. This would then inform how district officials organise themselves by operationalising multi-pronged and multi-directional structures and systems that will inform

and, in turn, are informed by various functions and practices. These structures and systems, as well as leadership functions, harness the district-wide context. They are responsive and also help to identify partners that bolster DOs efforts while employing an adaptive learning culture. Subsequently, all these elements would then enhance sustained district-wide teaching and learning culture. However, to sustain improvement, there is always a need for DOs to revisit and reevaluate their philosophy while also acknowledging that constraints may hinder their efforts.

### **7.5. Concluding remarks**

I began with the assumption that DOs' role in enhancing teaching and learning is promising yet neglected in the field of research as well as in policy development. As indicated in Section 1.5, exploring the district leaders' conceptualisation of the responsibility of district leadership is essential as a starting point in sourcing leadership capacity at all levels of the system while addressing the NDP 2030 mandate of improving education for all. This study may contribute to the scholarly debates on the substantive area in which little is known on the perspectives and practices of district-level leaders on their leadership role and on how they coordinate support in supporting principals, SMTs and teachers to improve teaching and learning. The findings of this study may also provide a meaningful guide for further conversation, reflection, and future research on how district officials can positively impact student achievement in their schools. Lastly, study findings may add to the body of knowledge by revealing barriers and opportunities that district leaders face as they strive to influence how to manage teaching and learning in schools. The experiences of district officials are evidence of promising results of district officials who are deliberate in improving learner performance across the district while acknowledging that there are also adaptive challenges that they need to work around. Of course, there are also limitations, as discussed in Chapter 4. Hence these findings are not definitive and cannot be generalised to other districts. However, these findings suggest that education districts can, in fact, facilitate improvement at a large scale, particularly consistency of content taught and covered as well as using data to inform teaching and learning. As a concluding statement, the NDP (2030) indicates that poor performance in schools is a reflection of weaknesses at the district level, which cannot provide targeted support to schools. However, my takeaway from

this study is that; district offices that are deliberate in creating a proactive approach to supporting schools are far more successful than their less proactive counterparts. These findings suggest that the ‘we are in this together’ philosophy shared by district officials and schools was the backbone of their success in sustaining and improving learner performance.



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## **APPENDICES**

### **APPENDIX A**

#### **Introductory questions**

1. How long have you been working served in this district?
2. How many years of experience do you have in your current position? All in your present district? What about other leadership positions?
3. Describe your educational career from the time you started teaching to your present role.
4. What motivated you to become a district director/CES-CLI/ Circuit Manager, DCES-CLI?

#### **Research question 1**

1. How would you describe your leadership role as a district official in relation to supporting teaching and learning in schools? (Probe: What do you understand support to mean for your role as a district official? Explain what you do when you visit a school to support teaching and learning).
2. What in your opinion constitutes quality teaching and learning? (Probe: Why? How can this be achieved?). What does it mean to promote quality teaching and learning across all schools in your district? What is your leadership role as district official?
3. Could you describe your district's strategy in supporting teaching and learning and schools?
4. What concrete examples can you provide regarding your activities that support teaching and learning in schools?
5. What in your opinion positively affects your work of supporting teaching and learning? (Probe: Why?)
6. What do you believe are your leadership strengths?
7. What in your opinion negatively affects your work of supporting teaching and learning? (Probe: Why?)
8. What do you believe to be the most important goals of the school district? What actions do you take that are in support of these goals? How has the district planning influenced your ability to achieve the goals you mentioned?
9. What core beliefs and values regarding your role as a district official do you believe are important? Please provide details
10. Your district learner achievement performance is strongly guided by your actions and behaviours as district officials. Do you agree or disagree? Please explain your response.

#### **Research question 2**

11. In your district, schools have different performance levels, capacity, and demographics. How do you organise yourselves to be able to accommodate these varying school needs? What are the advantages and disadvantages to this approach? How do you know if your actions are effective?

12. What new challenges do you think the district most needs to address in relation to supporting teaching and learning? How do you mitigate against those challenges?
13. What are the common district leadership practices that support teaching and learning across all schools?
14. Who do you regard as your stakeholders in realizing your targets that you set for your district? How do you involve these stakeholders? How do they respond?
15. In what ways do district officials work with schools to align curriculum, teaching, assessment to enhance teaching and learning in your district?
16. Are there any specific ways that your district office creates organisational structures and systems that support and enhance teachers and school management? How do you support principals to be curriculum leaders?
17. How do you monitor learner performance in your district?
18. What capacities do district officials have to support instructional leadership by school principals?
19. Kindly identify the kind of resources the district has and how the district go about in utilising such resources to support instructional leadership by school principals?
20. What recommendations do you wish to give as a way of encouraging the synergy of district officials and school principals in their quest to boost instructional leadership?



## **APPENDIX B**

### **Observation Guide: District/principals support and accountability meetings**

DATE: \_\_\_\_\_

ACTIVITY \_\_\_\_\_

Formal presentations by District official:

Major activities of District Officials and principals:

Questions and comments by principals:

Proof and evidence: (describe):

Evidence of collaborative working relationships among district officials and principals:

Other observations:

## APPENDIX C

02 September 2016



### COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

#### Request for permission to conduct research in your district

Dear [REDACTED]

District Director: [REDACTED] District

My name is Pinkie Mthembu. I am studying towards PHD (Education, Leadership, Management and Policy) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The topic of my study is:

#### **The district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in South African schools: Evidence from two districts in Gauteng Province**

The purpose of the study is to explore district leaders' understanding and their experience on practicing their role in supporting teaching and learning as defined in the Policy on the Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts in South Africa (RSA, 2013). Exploring the district leaders' conceptualisation of their leadership role is essential as a starting point in tapping leadership capacity at all levels of the system as well as addressing NDP 2030 mandate of improving education for all. The study will also explore how district leaders enact and co-ordinate leadership practices within the district sub-directorates in supporting teaching and learning across all schools in their jurisdiction. I would like to seek your participation in this study because I believe that you will provide insights in expanding of knowledge in the phenomenon of district leadership.

I will interview participants at their convenience and it should take approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded using an audiotape with your permission and I will request that you give consent and sign a written form prior to the interview. Additionally, I will require documents, for example, Department Circulars, District profile and Circuit school profiles, District Development Plan. The information collected will be used to write a research report for my thesis and an electronic copy of the thesis may be widely available, as PHD Theses are required to be put in the University of Natal Research Space database. It is also possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the study. All the information about your district and the participants' responses will be kept confidential and only I and my supervisors can access it. The findings will be presented in such a way that you cannot be identified by using pseudonyms. That is, the name of the district and your name will be not be specified. The notes, documents and recordings will be stored for a period of 5 years before they are destroyed.

If you take part in the study, you have the right to refuse to answer any particular question, to check and make any amendments to the transcripts of your interview. You will be able to withdraw from the research at any time during the study. You can ask any further questions about the study during your participation and you will be given access to a summary of findings from the research when it is concluded. Also note that there will be no financial benefits that participants may accrue as a result of their participation in this project. All documents and observations will be treated with strict confidentiality.

Please read through this information sheet carefully and then sign the consent form on the next page. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me at pemthembu@yahoo.com, contact no. [REDACTED] or contact my supervisors using contact details below:

Dr TT Bhengu  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Corner Richmond and Marianhill Road  
Pinetown  
3236  
[Bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za)

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Corner Richmond and Marianhill Road  
Pinetown  
3236  
[ChikokoV@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ChikokoV@ukzn.ac.za)

Thank you very much for your help!  
Pinkie E. Mthembu

#### **Consent Form for Participating education district**

I agree/do not agree that my education district can participate in the research conducted by Pinkie E. Mthembu. I also agree for the information to be used for the writing of the thesis, the publication of the articles and conference presentations. I also understand that I can withdraw at any time and that the participants will give consent before they participate.

I agree/do not agree for my responses to be recorded with a digital audio recorder.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX D

02 September 2016



### COLLEGE OF HUMANITIES

#### Request for permission to conduct research in your district

Dear [REDACTED]

District Official: [REDACTED] District

My name is Pinkie Mthembu. I am studying towards PHD (Education, Leadership, Management and Policy) at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. The topic of my study is:

#### **The district leadership role in supporting teaching and learning in South African schools: Evidence from two districts in Gauteng Province**

The purpose of the study is to explore district leaders' understanding and their experience on practicing their role in supporting teaching and learning as defined in the Policy on the Roles and Responsibilities of Education Districts in South Africa (RSA, 2013). Exploring the district leaders' conceptualisation of their leadership role is essential as a starting point in tapping leadership capacity at all levels of the system as well as addressing NDP 2030 mandate of improving education for all. The study will also explore how district leaders enact and co-ordinate leadership practices within the district sub-directorates in supporting teaching and learning across all schools in their jurisdiction. I would like to seek your participation in this study because I believe that you will provide insights in expanding knowledge in the phenomenon of district leadership.

I will interview you at their convenience and it should take approximately 90 minutes. The interview will be recorded using an audiotape with your permission and I will request that you give consent and sign a written form prior to the interview. Additionally, I will require documents, for example, Department Circulars, District profile and Circuit school profiles, District Development Plan, memos. The information collected will be used to write a research report for my thesis and an electronic copy of the thesis may be widely available, as PHD Theses are required to be put in the University of Natal Research Space database. It is also possible that articles and presentations may be the outcome of the study. All the information about your district and the participants' responses will be kept confidential and only I and my supervisors can access it. The findings will be presented in such a way that you cannot be identified by using pseudonyms. That is, the name of the district and your name will not be specified. The notes, documents and recordings will be stored for a period of 5 years before they are destroyed.

If you take part in the study, you have the right to refuse to answer any particular question, to check and make any amendments to the transcripts of your interview. You will be able to withdraw from the research at any time during the study. You can ask any further questions about the study during your participation and you will be

given access to a summary of findings from the research when it is concluded. Also note that there will be no financial benefits that participants may accrue as a result of their participation in this project. All documents and observations will be treated with strict confidentiality.

Please read through this information sheet carefully and then sign the consent form on the next page. If you have any questions or concerns, please feel free to email me at [pemthembu@yahoo.com](mailto:pemthembu@yahoo.com), contact no. [REDACTED] or contact my supervisors using contact details below:

Dr TT Bhengu  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Corner Richmond and Marianhill Road  
Pinetown  
3236  
[Bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:Bhengutt@ukzn.ac.za)

Professor V. Chikoko  
School of Education  
University of KwaZulu-Natal  
Edgewood Campus  
Corner Richmond and Marianhill Road  
Pinetown  
3236  
[ChikokoV@ukzn.ac.za](mailto:ChikokoV@ukzn.ac.za)

Thank you very much for your help!  
Pinkie E. Mthembu

### **Consent Form for Participating education district**

I agree/do not agree that my education district can participate in the research conducted by Pinkie E. Mthembu. I also agree for the information to be used for the writing of the thesis, the publication of the articles and conference presentations. I also understand that I can withdraw at any time and that the participants will give consent before they participate.

I agree/do not agree for my responses to be recorded with a digital audio recorder.

Signed: \_\_\_\_\_

Name: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

## APPENDIX E:

REPUBLIC OF SOUTH AFRICA

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**RESEARCH APPROVAL LETTER**

Date:	20 October 2016
Validity of Research Approval:	6 February 2017 to 29 September 2017
Name of Researcher:	Mthembu P.E.
Address of Researcher:	P.O. Box 2178; Pietermaritzburg; 3200
Telephone / Fax Number/s:	031 260 8177; 084 581 7544; 086 569 7496
Email address:	Mthembu@ukzn.ac.za
Research Topic:	A case study of the leadership role of District Officials in supporting teaching and learning in South Africa
Number and type of schools:	NONE
District/s/HO	

**Re: Approval in Respect of Request to Conduct Research**

This letter serves to indicate that approval is hereby granted to the above-mentioned researcher to proceed with research in respect of the study indicated above. The onus rests with the researcher to negotiate appropriate and relevant time schedules with the school/s and/or offices involved. A separate copy of this letter must be presented to the Principal, SGB and the relevant District/Head Office Senior Manager confirming that permission has been granted for the research to be conducted. However participation is VOLUNTARY.

The following conditions apply to research. The researcher has agreed to and may proceed with the above study subject to the conditions listed below being met. Approval may be withdrawn should any of the conditions listed below be flouted:

**CONDITIONS FOR CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN**

1. The District/Head Office Senior Manager/s concerned, the Principal/s and the chairperson/s of the School Governing Body (SGB) must be presented with a copy of this letter.
2. The Researcher will make every effort to obtain the goodwill and co-operation of the officials, principals, SGBs, teachers, parents and learners involved. Participation is voluntary and additional remuneration will not be paid;

*Handwritten signature* 24/10/2016

## APPENDIX F

## TURNITIN REPORT

systemically by supporting schools, especially those with poor performance. According to this policy, the roles of the DOs include assisting principals and educators to improve the quality of teaching and learning in their institutions. Furthermore, they must provide an environment to enable the professional development of educators. District offices are also expected to maintain accountability by holding education institutions in a district are responsible for their performance (RSA, 2013).

The role of education DOs is to ensure that the poor state of teaching is addressed. Also, education districts are expected to support schools by tactically coordinating their work so that "the individual parts of the district system operate in concert with one another, as opposed to working in separate silos or in competition for limited district resources" (Honig & Rainey, 2015, p. 1). This suggests that synergy among the different departments within the education district may improve standards in the district by supporting teaching and learning requirements in schools. Moreover, DOs are seen as one of the critical focal points in supporting schools, "especially in terms of support offered to schools, and strengthened monitoring of the curriculum at school level to turn around learner performance" (DBE, 2015, p. 25). The district offices are also perceived as policy mediators between the national and provincial departments and schools with the DOs having a central function in overseeing the execution of the policies

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