UNIVERSITY OF
KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI
YAKWAZULU-NATALI

SCHOOL OF EDUCATION

THE ROLE OF DISTRICT OFFICIALS IN SUPPORTING UNDER-PERFORMING SCHOOLS: PERSPECTIVES OF SCHOOL PRINCIPALS

ZENHLANHLA ZENNETH CIBANE

204 516 144

Supervisor: Dr B.N.C.K. MKHIZE

A dissertation submitted in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Education in the Discipline of Educational Leadership Management and Policy.

College of Humanities, School of Education

Edgewood Campus

JANUARY 2020

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This dissertation has been submitted with/ ~~without~~ my approval.

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Supervisor: Dr B. N. C. K. Mkhize Date

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I wish to express my sincerest gratitude to:

God, the Almighty, the Higher Power, who shielded me in times when I thought I was never going to complete this degree. God gave me the power to conquer all the challenges I came across in the year 2019.

To my supervisor, Dr B.N.C.K. Mkhize, thank you for your patience through it all. Thank you for motivating me to complete the work, even when I had thrown in the towel. Thank you for sacrificing your December holidays just so you could continue supervising my work. Thank you, Ngunezi!

To all the lecturers of the ELMP Department, thank you for your teamwork and words of encouragement.

To my husband, thank you for always reminding me that through all the hardships I can still rise above it all.

To my children, especially my first-born Lethinhlanhla, for taking up the role of being a mother when I couldn't be at home. Thank you for the support, my dear daughter.

To my mother for her never-ending support.

To all my friends for continually encouraging me when I felt I couldn't go on.

To Mmele Nyathi, for being the big brother I never had, and for everything you did for me in ensuring that I maintained a state of sanity through it all. Thank you so much, Nsindane.

To Dr Edwards and my colleagues at Canaan College, thank you for inspiring and encouraging me when things got tougher.

To all the principals who agreed to participate in this study, thank you for welcoming me into your schools and for sharing with me your experiences. Indeed, your experiences carved the completion of this study. Thank you.

Abstract

This research study aimed at exploring what the principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools. The study explored this role through the perspectives five principals of under-performing secondary schools in Umlazi District. These principals had an immense contribution through sharing their experiences at the school level. This qualitative research study was constructed within an interpretive paradigm. Face to face semi- structured interviews were used as a method of data generation. This study is framed by instructional leadership theory. Various local and international scholars were used in developing discussions around the role of District Officials' support to schools. Literature reveals that District Official's support that is framed by collaborative efforts between the District, principals and educators improve learner achievement. While there are some local empirical studies that have been conducted on the role of district support, there is not enough literature that explores the role of District Officials' support to under-performing secondary schools. This is what motivated me to explore the role of District officials support through the perspectives of principals.

The findings of this study revealed that District Officials do support under-performing schools, though support is not enough according to principals' expectations. Included in this study are key lessons that were derived from this research journey. One of the key lessons that emerged from data generation, was the importance of the collaboration between the District Officials and under-performing school in planning and setting out goals towards improved practices that enhance learner achievement among other things.

Keywords: District Officials, Support, leadership, Under-performing schools.

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LIST OF ACRONYMS AND ABBREVIATIONS

ACE	Advanced certificate in Education
CES	Chief Education Specialist
DBE	Department of Basic Education
DCES	Deputy Chief Education Specialist
DD	District Director
FET	Further Education and Training
GET	General Education and Training
IDSO	Institutional Development Support Officer
PED	Provincial Education Departments
PLC	Professional Learning Communities
SES	Senior Education Specialist

CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION TO THE STUDY

1.1 Introduction

District officials' support serve as a critical resource towards enhancing teaching and learning in schools for improved results. Policy advocates that district should work collaboratively with principals and educators to help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching (DBE, 2013, p.16). Chapter one, as an introductory chapter, unfolds by outlining the context within which the study was conducted. The context is underpinned by the presentation of background and rationale, the statement of the problem and purpose of the study. Definitions of the key concepts that are prominent throughout the study are presented in this chapter. This will be followed by a brief theoretical background used in the study and an account of the research approach that was used in conducting the study. Finally, the chapter provides an overview of the way in which the study was conducted.

1.2 Context of the study

The context of the study provides the reader with the background that gave birth to this research study. In this section the information regarding the research problem and the rationale and motivation for this study are explained in detail.

1.2.1 Background and Rationale

The Department of Basic Education's Policy on the Organisation, Roles, and Responsibilities of Education Districts (DBE, 2013) clearly stipulates that district officials are 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 help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching" (DBE, 2013, p.16). This policy highlights that district officials are to work collaboratively with principals and educators in schools to assist them to achieve excellence in teaching and learning. Scholars highlight that effective district leadership is essential for the success of the Department of Basic Education as a whole, and most importantly for improved student learning (DeVita, 2007; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson & Wahlstrom, 2014; Bantwini, 2015).

Supportive districts serve as agents of change which places them in a better position to decentralise responsibility and support to schools, and in the process promotes school improvement (Bergeson, 2014). The significance of district support is indicated by Waters, Robert and Marzano (2010), who state that supportive districts ensure collaborative goal setting with schools. This collaborative goal effort ensures that all stakeholders work together towards attaining academic improvement goals (Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008). This means that the primary focus of District Officials' role is to support the delivery of curriculum in schools and to enhance and monitor the quality of learning experiences offered to learners (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2016). It is argued that for local schools' educational needs to be met, district officials have a critical role to play in working closely with the schools (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2016). Therefore, Literature and Policy corroborates in highlighting the importance of collaboration between the District and schools to achieve quality teaching and learning.

Scholars emphasise the significance of school District Officials' role is ensuring quality teaching and learning, effective assessment, and increased learner performance and achievement (Anderson, 2010; McLaughlin, 2011; Spillane, 2012; Abele, Iver, & Farley, 2013). Roberts (2011), states that there are five possible areas of operation in ensuring that the primary role of district officials is executed. These stages are policy implementation; leading and managing change; creating an enabling environment for schools to operate effectively; intervening in under-performing schools; and offering administrative and professional services to schools and teachers (Roberts, 2011).

An under-performing secondary school is deemed to be under-performing if its percentage pass in the National Senior Certificate examination falls below 60% (SASA, 2012). In 2015 my school obtained 37% in Grade 12 results, which therefore means it was deemed an under-performing secondary school. As an educator in an under-performing school I have witnessed visits from politicians, provincial and District Officials all exerting pressure on the principal and his subordinates.

The literature and policy as presented above states that district officials have the task of offering support to schools so that quality teaching and learning can be achieved. However, what I have observed in practice is that when schools have under-performed, District

Officials seem not to work collaboratively with the schools to offer support to assist with turnaround strategies. Instead, what I have witnessed in my school is that the principal seems to be pressured by District Officials to raise the bar on the school's performance. This pressure seems to be occurring in the absence of any form of support. As such, it creates a situation where the principal himself seem not to have a workable solution other than transferring the pressure to educators. This pressure wheel creates a non-conducive atmosphere for teaching and learning, thus further exacerbating the already prevalent unfavorable conditions. Studies conducted by Bantwini and Diko (2016) reveal that District Officials do support under-performing schools, though this support seems to be inadequate. The studies that explore the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools are limited in South Africa. Therefore, I find it significant to explore this role from the perspective of under-performing school principals.

1.2.2 Statement of the problem and Purpose of the study

The existing body of literature advocates that districts should put more emphasis on the leadership qualities of principals in schools to anchor performance and achievement (Honig, 2010; Marsh, 2011; Robinson & Buntrok, 2011; Duke, 2012). Several scholars have argued that districts are incapable of stimulating and sustaining meaningful initiatives in teaching and learning because of their political and bureaucratic character (Honig, 2010; Marsh, 2011; Robinson & Buntrok, 2011; Duke, 2012). Marsh (2011) attests that districts have become overly politicised and unresponsive to their schools, teachers and students. This is a problem because when districts are unable to positively impact teaching and learning in schools due to their overly politicised nature, then it may create under-performance in schools. This is because when districts are unresponsive to their schools, teachers and students no one can be held accountable for what is happening in schools. This means that schools may not receive adequate support towards leadership skills, teaching and learning among other things. On the other hand, some local scholars (Jansen, 2004; Robert, 2011; Bantwini, 2015) argue that South Africa possesses phenomenal educational policies, though policy is not entirely put into practice. This is because South Africa has a long way to go to make the ideals (in policy) concrete and achievable within educational institutions. This means that there is more room for improved implementation of

educational policies so that what is documented in policies regarding support can be seen in practice.

This study is therefore significant because it seeks to uncover what principals of under-performing schools understand to be the role of District Officials in supporting their schools and how they experience this role of support. Furthermore, the findings that will emanate from data generation may trigger some reflections on the part of all educational practitioners between the district and the school respectively.

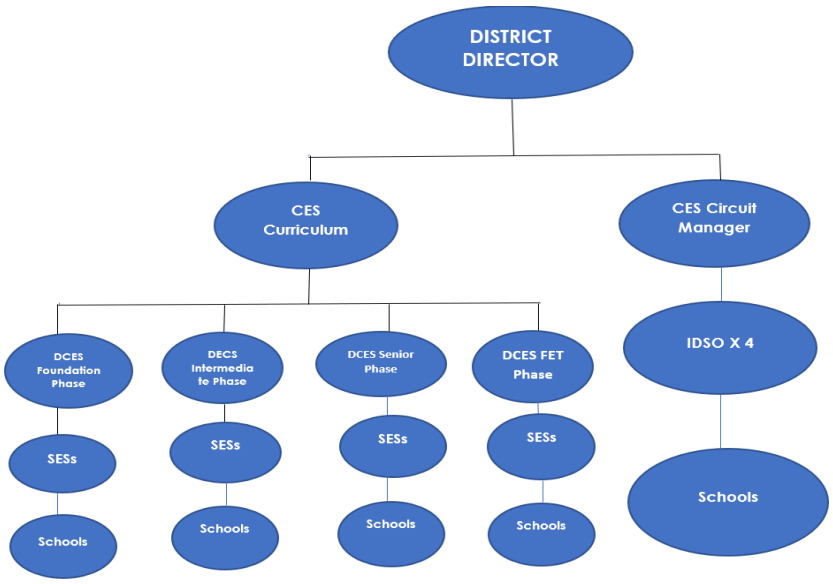
1.3 Key concepts

1.3.1 District Office

This study views the district office as a structured unit that comprises of the District Director, office administration and the principals within that district. They work collaboratively as an important link between the schools and the district to collectively to implement solutions to identified challenges and achieve the set goals of the district and schools (Rorrer et al., 2008). The district office is ultimately responsible to ensure that quality teaching and learning is enabled in all schools with the district. According to the policy of the district office, this office can further be divided into circuit offices (RSA, 2013).

1.3.2 District Officials

District Officials include employees that work within the central office in each district. Their role is to offer comprehensive support to schools within the district so that effective teaching and learning is continuously taking place (RSA, 2013). There are a number of officials in the district office however, for the purpose of this study, district officials refer to: District Director (DD), Chief Education Specialists (CES) (Circuit Manager), CES (Curriculum Support - Curriculum Learning and Implementation) – General Education and Training (GET) Phase and Further Education and Training (FET) Phase. Deputy Chief Education Specialists (DCES), Institutional Development Support Officer (IDSO) (Curriculum Support) – GET and FET. The focus in this study is on the District Management Team (DMT) who are responsible for supporting teaching and learning in the district. This team involves: DD, CESs and DCES in curriculum support.



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

Figure 1: Organogram of District Officials that support teaching and learning

1.3.3 Under-performing secondary schools

According to Heystek (2015) an under-performing school is one that is characterised by inadequate learning outcomes and poor-quality results. This means that the level of performance between learners, teachers and the school leadership has not reached the required level or set standard as per the Department of Education. Policy states that a secondary school is identified as under-performing if its percentage pass rate in the National Senior Certificate examinations is below 60% (RSA, 2014). For this study, the above definition is adopted for an underperforming secondary school.

1.3.4 Leadership

Leadership refers to the ability to influence other people's attitudes and energise participation in activities associated with organisational success (Leithwood, 2010). Miskel and Hoy (2008) assert that the concept of leadership is viewed as being about rational processes in which leaders can influence followers into believing that it is in their best interest to cooperate. Hargreaves

(2006) states that the influence must be one that lasts and spreads despite changing circumstances.

1.3.5 Support

Support in this study refers to any assistance given to under-performing schools by the district officials. Lugaz and De Grauwe (2010) state that support in the form of school visits by the district officials is a worldwide practice. District officials emphasise different aspects of support in line with the mandate that is given to them by the Department of Basic Education (Lugaz& De Grauwe, 2010). In the past, departmental visits were viewed by the schools as inspection. In South Africa, the term "inspection" was perceived undemocratic, and was later avoided in favour of "support" (Narsee, 2006). Support is therefore seen as developmental and in keeping with the democratic dispensation. As such, visits by the district officials in any form are counted as support.

1.4 Theoretical framework

This study is framed by instructional leadership theory.

1.4.1 Instructional leadership theory

Instructional leadership refers to the management of curriculum and instruction by principals (Bush, 2009). Kaparou and Bush (2016) affirm that instructional leadership includes various activities that lead to effective principal-teacher interaction for improving the quality of teaching and learning. This is emphasised by Day-Gu and Sammons (2016), who conclude by highlighting that principals' instructional leadership (in conjunction with transformational leadership) is crucial for success and an essential contributor to improved teaching.

These studies underline the need for instructional leadership to improve student learning, and for under-performing schools to turn themselves around. It is clear that instructional leadership is often associated with school-based leadership; however, this study aligns with research that suggests instructional leadership should be district-wide, not just school-based (Belden, Russonello,& Stewart, 2005; Rorrer, Skrla, & Scheurich, 2008; Augustine, Gonzalez, Ikemoto, Russell, &Zellman, 2009).

District-wide instructional leadership advocates professional development provided by the district to assist principals in implementing job-embedded instructional leadership support (Augustine et al., 2009). Instructional decisions taken at district level (as against at school level only) assist in providing more support for schools and teachers (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart et al., 2005). District Officials play an essential role in creating preconditions for local school improvement (Rorrer et al., 2008).

The scholars suggest that for district-wide instructional leadership to occur there needs to be district visibility in schools which will be beyond an emblematic tour. Honig (2012), stresses that no district-wide instructional leadership can be attained without full involvement of the District Officials in instructional programmes. For principals to build capacity for instructional leadership there needs to be a sustained and coordinated job-integrated level of professional development (Honig, 2012).

1.5 Location of the study

The study was conducted in five secondary schools in the Umlazi Township district of the province of KwaZulu-Natal in South Africa. The five principals of these schools formed part of the case. These schools are some of the schools that have been termed under-performing secondary schools. Data were generated in school principals' offices after school operational hours during the month within which participants were interviewed.

1.5.1 Objectives of the study

The objectives of this study were:

1. To uncover what principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools.
2. To understand how the principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools.

1.5.2 Critical questions to be asked

1. What do principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?
1. How do principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

1.6 Research design and methodology

1.6.1 Research paradigm

"A research paradigm represents a particular worldview that defines, for the researchers who hold this view, what is acceptable to research and how this should be done" (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014, p.22). After engaging with three research paradigms, namely: post-positivism, interpretivism and critical paradigm, this study used an interpretive paradigm. An interpretive paradigm endeavors to embrace the multifaceted and dynamic quality of the social world and allow for the viewing of a social research problem holistically (Leitch, Hill, & Harrison, 2010). The researcher chose to work within the interpretive paradigm because she needed to uncover the principal's understanding of the District Officials' role to support under-performing schools and their experiences in receiving this support.

1.6.2 Research approach

Qualitative research focuses on techniques of investigation that consider the participants' history, culture, interactive activities and emotional lives (Berg & Lune, 2004). This means that the researcher engaged in situations from the viewpoint of the participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). The researcher chose to work using the qualitative research approach because it allowed her, among other things, a first-hand experience of how district officials support under-performing secondary schools with turnaround strategies. Through the qualitative data approach, as through the interpretive paradigm, the researcher was able to capture the principal's understanding of the District Official's support to under-performing schools and their experiences in receiving the support.

1.6.3 Research methodology

The research methodology for this study is that for a case study. A case study was appropriate because it afforded the researcher an opportunity to engage with principals of under-performing secondary schools in understanding their views of their situations. A case study is an in-depth study of a case in its context (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

1.6.4 Data generation methods

Data for this research study were generated mainly through face to face semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews use predetermined, open-ended questions that may lead the interview to any direction (DiCicco-Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this research study because they allowed the participants to fully express their views during scheduled meetings. This assisted the researcher to gather adequate information from the participants through probing them as issues arose in scheduled meetings.

1.6.5 Sampling

"Sampling involves making decisions about which people, settings, events or behaviors to include in the study" (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014, p.59). This study was conducted with five principals of under-performing secondary schools in Umlazi District. All participants were selected based on their geographical accessibility and willingness to participate in the study. The principals of under-performing secondary schools in the study fitted a purposive criterion because they are gatekeepers of schools and they communicate directly with the District Officials. Furthermore, their schools had been labeled under-performing schools after obtaining less than a 60% pass in Grade 12. They were therefore able to give me detailed descriptions of their experiences in their contexts.

1.6.6 Data analysis

The data for this study were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). All interviews were audio- recorded with the participants' permission, and transcribed verbatim. This assisted with descriptive codes for analysis which were aimed at identifying, linking and

labeling the interviews to determine themes and patterns. The process of coding included three stages, which were open, axial and selective coding (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2007). Open coding is the process of generating initial concepts from data; axial coding is the process of developing and linking concepts into conceptual families; and selective coding refers to the formalising of these relationships into the theoretical framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2007). The codes were then divided into categories that were evident in the data. The categories that were distinctive were grouped into themes (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2009). These themes were used as subtitles to group the findings of this study.

1.6.7 Ethical Issues

Permission to conduct this research study was obtained from the University Research Board, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education and participants. Participants were able to grant informed consent because issues of voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity and non-maleficence were discussed in detail (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). They were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation or prejudice (Shenton, 2004). In ensuring credibility, the researcher disclosed her background to the participants to allow openness and trust, which guaranteed honesty from the participants (Shenton, 2004).

1.6.8 Validity and reliability/trustworthiness

To render a qualitative study valid, it must be checked according to criteria of trustworthiness. These comprise credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility deals with the focus of the research and refers to confidence in how well data and processes of analysis address the intended focus (Polit & Hungler, 1999). In fulfilling this criterion, the researcher used specific sources (principals of under-performing secondary schools) to ensure that data generated addressed the focus of the study.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or groups (Polit & Hungler, 1999). This was enhanced through a clear description of the

context and the thorough presentation of the characteristics of the participants. In this study, the researcher was not vigorously seeking for transferability. However, her position was that through execution of the task, the findings could be transferred to similar contexts.

Dependability refers to a situation where a researcher can account for why there may be variations in the study (Brown & Dowling, 2008). In keeping up with dependability, the researcher ensured that the research design, methodology and data generation method displayed adequate information. Also, that there was fitness for purpose. This meant that the method of data generation (face to face semi-structured interviews) ensured that the researcher could generate the data she needed. Furthermore, she employed techniques used by other scholars in conducting research of a similar nature.

Confirmability is the in-depth methodological description to allow reliability of research results to be scrutinised (Shenton, 2004). To improve confirmability, it is vital for the research process to be transparent for another researcher to reach similar conclusions. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, and the participants' voices were presented verbatim.

1.6.9 Limitations

Simon (2011) states that limitations are the weaknesses that hinder the researcher. Limitations in this study may be that principals were generally always busy, and so time for their interviews may have been limited. However, I negotiated for all my interviews to be in the afternoon when there were fewer operational activities within the school and office.

1.7 Overview of the chapters

Chapter 1 serves as an introductory chapter to the research study.

Chapter 2 provides a detailed discussion of related literature on discourses of under-performance, support and district leadership. The chapter also presents the pillars of the theoretical background of the study.

Chapter 3 presents a detailed description of the research process and all its stages.

Chapter 4 provides the discussions and findings of the study.

Chapter 5 concludes the study by presenting the summary of research findings from the research journey with the use of literature reviewed. Chapter 5 also presents the key learnings that emerged from the research journey.

1.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter provides an abridgment of the thesis through highlighting the research problem that initiated the research study. It states briefly how the thesis can assist with reflection on the part of the district officials on how they can execute their duties in future. The chapter also provides a brief discussion of the related literature, highlighting district support to schools, and a brief description of the research approach used in the study.

The next chapter discusses the related literature in detail. It also presents the theoretical framework of the study.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW AND THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

2.1 Introduction

Chapter one provided an orientation to the study. It outlined the background and rationale; statement of the problem and purpose of the study; the objectives of the study, and key research questions; finally, it presented a brief outline of the research design and methodology. This chapter first conceptualises leadership and management to pave the way towards understanding the role of the district officials. Second, it reviews literature on the role of District Officials, including the job description of district officials as mandated by the Department of Basic Education. Third, the debates around the role of the district officials' support of under-performing secondary schools will be discussed in detail. Fourth, the turnaround strategies of schools will also form part of a discussion. Finally, the instructional leadership theory will be discussed.

2.2 Defining Educational leadership

The definition of educational leadership is not static; it is unpredictable and subjective. But there are critical features that are included in any definition of educational leadership. First, leadership is a process of influence by school leaders on their staff and other stakeholders for achieving desired goals (Author & Author, 2003). Second, influential and successful leaders develop vision for their schools based on their professional and personal values (Yukl, 2002). Third, leaders in education clarify their vision to influence all stakeholders to share the vision (Yukl, 2002). Last, all the operations and philosophies of the school are channeled towards the achievement of the shared vision (Author & Author, 2003). This means that leadership cannot be understood through a narrow view of one aspect of leadership, but it requires a wide view including various components of leadership. These components include leadership as influence, leadership and value, and leadership and vision (Bush, 2008).

2.2.3 Leadership as influence

Leadership as influence takes away the notion of authority that the term leadership naturally possesses. This is because influence is intentional and can be exercised by anyone with an

intention to achieve a goal in a school (Bush, 2008). It could be learners, teachers or individuals such as parents and community. Leadership as influence also works with distributed leadership. This is where leadership roles are shared among members of an organisation, when bodies such as professional learning communities (PLCs) gain momentum. This is because PLCs assume an approach of having all professionals (within an organisation) contributing towards one shared goal (Dufour, 2004). This means that anyone within an organisation is afforded an opportunity to lead and be influential towards the organisation's objectives.

Educational leadership and its critical features cannot function in isolation. Leadership works in collaboration with management. Management is about effectively and efficiently maintaining current organisational arrangements (Bush, 2007). It is also driven by core features, which are planning, organising, evaluating and implementing.

2.2.4 Leadership and values

Leadership as influence is not enough to yield successful results without set values. Leaders' actions are framed by clear professional and personal values; as such, values form a crucial part of leadership. School leaders are expected to underpin their actions with clear personal and professional values (Day, Harris, & Hadfield, 2001). This statement implies that leaders choose their values, but that is seldom the case as dominant values are imposed on leaders by the government (Bush, 2008). The imposition by the government can be detrimental towards set personal and professional values (Bush, 2008). This is because when leaders are given a prescription of values, they may not be very devoted towards upholding them (Bush, 2008). Leaders and teachers are more devoted about values when they own them (Hargreaves, 2004). Leadership with clear personal and professional values is a vital tool in achieving excellence in a school as an organisation. For excellence to materialise, it is imperative that leaders are afforded an opportunity to create values that represent their moral purpose for an organisation.

2.2.5 Leadership and vision

The last component of leadership is vision. Vision has over the years been regarded as a fundamental component of leadership. This is because school leaders' leadership is the quest of their individual vision (Thoonen, 2011). Through effective influence, leaders can see their vision becoming a reality (Hargreaves, 2004). This means that it would be impossible for school

leaders' vision to be achieved without involving other stakeholders in an organisation (Thoonen, 2011). When leaders use influence and shared values to their benefit, they create a situation where a school can sustain its vision, thereby achieving success as an organisation. A school's vision can be sustained when leaders realise that their influence towards achieving desirable goals must happen in collaboration with effective management.

2.3 The leadership roles of District Officials

In South Africa, education districts serve as resource centres for schools (Chinsamy, 2002; Schoeman, 2004; Narsee, 2006; Mohlala, 2007). This means that an education district's role is to provide adequate resources to ensure quality teaching and learning in schools (Schoeman, 2004). According to Schoeman, the rationale behind the establishment of district offices was to bridge the gap between education authorities and schools. This was done to ensure school effectiveness and efficiency through providing educational resources and professional support (Narsee, 2006; Diko, 2011).

The Department of Basic Education adopted a district development programme to strengthen the capacity of each district in all the provinces. When this was done, district offices were understood to be intermediaries between the central education offices and the schools (Chimsamy, 2002). While this is how the districts' role is understood, Roberts (2012) argues that the core purpose of educational districts in South Africa is to support the delivery of the curriculum and ensure that all learners are afforded good quality learning opportunities evidenced by learner achievement (Roberts, 2012).

The leadership role of district officials is a critical feature in supporting under-performing schools towards improving academic results. Historically, such support was done through goal setting, frequent school visits, having high expectations and targeting improved academic results (Cuban, 1983). The support was underpinned by policies that suggested a total involvement of District Officials in what occurred in schools (Alto, 1982). For instance, District Officials led a district-wide assessment programme that set high expectations and enhanced academic performance (Winter, 1981). Such programmes assisted districts in diagnosing challenges at school level which resulted in programme changes where needed (Cuban, 1983). Districts also provided support through staff development programmes for teachers, school boards and

principals (Cuban, 1983). Staff development programmes were believed to be effective in whole school improvement, thereby bringing about transformation in under-performing schools.

Fast forward to studies conducted in the early 2000s, in which districts and its officials have a critical role in the education system. Districts are viewed as legal bodies mandated by the state to provide education to all students (Hightower, Knapp, Marsh, & McLaughlin, 2001). In the process of providing education, District Officials are to take into consideration issues of equality in relation to student's socio-economic background, race, disability and ethnicity, among others (Hightower et al., 2001). District Officials' role also includes that of being teacher educators for novice teachers as they traverse through the daily decisions about what and how to teach (Grossman, Thompson, & Valencia, 2001).

District Officials also affect the daily operations of the school through initiating a variety of policies contributing towards professional development. Most importantly, District Officials are responsible for the success of functions such as attaining educational goals, transportation, instructional guidance, maintenance of facilities, attendance, personnel and teachers' professional development (Hightower et al., 2001; Spillane, 2000, 2002; Rorrer et al., 2008).

In contrast, however, with those positive functions District Officials sometimes contribute towards the non-implementation or delay of new reforms by the teachers, particularly when districts do not understand the vision of the reforms (Spillane, 2002). District Officials are mandated by the state to ensure that support is adequately provided to schools. However, for this support to be effective, they need to understand the entire reforms and vision of the state.

The international historical view of the role of the District Officials seems to emphasise the undeniably vital role of the district officials in stimulating and maintaining meaningful reforms in teaching, learning and policy. However, much is to be uncovered in weighing whether responsibilities are visible in practice.

Roberts (2001) emphasises that the position of District Officials in the South African educational hierarchy makes them the potential vehicle for medium- to large-scale educational improvements. He argues that the District Officials' potential to be the centre within which educational improvement occurs lies in the districts' ability to support the delivery of the curriculum and ensure that learners receive good quality education (Roberts, 2001). The district

and its officials have an important role in ensuring the implementation of educational policies that were formulated in the post-apartheid era (Jansen, 2004). This era saw various educational policies being formulated to redress the past injustices that occurred in the apartheid era (Jansen, 2004).

The quality of teaching and learning remains the most important factor in shaping students' learning and growth. Schools and district leaders have the fundamental role of ensuring improved instructional practices. It is therefore essential that these leaders possess the necessary skills to deliver on their directive. According to Schoeman (2004), District Officials are tasked to coordinate, support and monitor the implementation of policies. These policies include curriculum delivery in schools, which is critical for educational quality (Schoeman, 2004).

The district tasks all require a high level of support, which is an international phenomenon when it comes to district leadership. Internationally, district leadership plays a vital role in ensuring that educational policies are implemented (Mavuso, 2014). In ensuring that policies are implemented; District Officials conduct constant inspection and continually offer advice to teachers (Mavuso, 2014). Internationally, District Officials ensure continuous learning through pedagogical evaluation of the teachers' work (Lugaz& De Grauwe, 2010).

Having outlined literature that delves into the District Officials' role, it is equally important to discuss the job description of the district officials as mandated by the Department of Basic Education.

2.3.1 District official's job description according to the Department of Basic Education

The vital role of the District Officials is to ensure that all learners in South Africa have access to high quality education. District offices serve as the bond between the provincial education departments (PEDs), educational institutions and the public (DBE, 2013). There are four main duties of the District Officials, with such duties being performed for schools that need them the most. These are planning, support, oversight and accountability, and public engagement (DBE, 2013). These duties are directly related to management functions. However, in each duty there is leadership involved; as stated above, leadership and management are linked.

i) Planning

The planning process involves gathering and analysing school, circuit and district data as a springboard to effective planning. District Officials are to help schools with development plans and incorporate these plans into district plans (DBE, 2013). Planning cannot happen without effective leadership. It also involves open channels of communication. This is because the process of planning by the District Officials is informed by the data that they gather from schools and circuits. For instance, if districts want to develop district-based winter school programmes, not all schools can benefit from such programmes without communicating their needs. It is the communication from the schools that will inform proper planning of the rollout of such programmes. It is also clear channels of communication that will inform proper support measures to schools leading to quality teaching and learning.

ii) Support

Support involves ensuring that education institutions are assisted to do their work in relation to education policy and law. District Officials are to assist school principals and teachers towards improving the quality of teaching and learning. This is done through school visits, classroom observations, cluster meetings, consultation, suitable feedback and other means of support. District Officials are to serve as information nodules for educational institutions on administration, policy and education law. They are responsible for facilitating information and communication technology (ICT) connections in all education institutions in the district. Most importantly, District Officials are to provide support for professional development of school managers, educators and administrative staff members (DBE, 2013). This means that support involves collaboration between the district and the schools to ensure quality teaching and learning. Effective support from the district creates a situation where teachers and principals may be held accountable for the overall performance of their schools.

iii) Oversight and accountability

Oversight and accountability entail District Officials' holding school management and their schools within the district accountable for the performance of their schools. They involve district officials accounting to the provincial Basic Education Department for the performance of schools in their district. District Officials are to account to the provincial Education Department in terms

of the performance agreements stipulating the functions, roles and responsibilities of district officials in line with relevant policies (DBE, 2013). Oversight and accountability start from ensuring that there is continuing professional development for school leaders (Mestry, 2017). This means that there should be continual in-service training to develop school leaders in ensuring school improvement and effectiveness. When there is continual professional development, the accountability pressure wheel from the province to the district to the school may be justified.

iv) Public engagement

Public engagement for district officials means consulting with the public in a transparent, open manner and upholding *Batho Pele* principles in all engagements with the public (DBE, 2013). This means that issues of community partnership should guide district officials in disseminating knowledge of the policies in this regard. For example, members of school governing bodies need to be developed to constructively contribute, among other things, towards the vision of the school.

2.3.2 District Officials' support for school principals

School principals have been termed by some scholars (Masango, 2013; Hallinger & Ko, 2015) as leaders of learning, shifting the focus from leaders of organisations. This is because of the principals' crucial role in continually improving the quality of education in schools (Hallinger & Ko, 2015). There is also a view that a good principal serves as a mechanism for unleashing capacities that already exist in a school as an organisation (Hopkins, 2006). In the quest to ensure quality education, there have been increasing responsibilities for principals as school leadership has become one of the major concerns of educational policy formulators (Huber, 2006). Principal leadership remains the central part of any school's sustained effectiveness and improvement (Day & Sammons, 2016). Given the importance of effective leadership in a school, it is important to note that principals cannot execute their duties in isolation; they need support from the District Officials.

The support that is expected to be provided by the District Officials is mandated by the Department of Basic Education (DBE). The policy states that the District Officials are to work collaboratively with principals, and give management and professional support (DBE, 2013).

Principals supported by the District Officials are to ensure that learners have access to a progressively high quality of education (DBE, 2013). However, policy is not practice: there are two emerging issues on District Officials' support. One emphasises that highly supportive District Officials have been proven to be instilling confidence in principals' ability to succeed in their schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Honig, 2012;). Another issue is that school districts have been found to be highly bureaucratic towards and unsupportive of schools (Moorosi &Bantwini, 2016).

The view of districts as highly supportive is due to District Officials having a clear vision of what comprises a good school, and a framework in which the principal can have autonomy to work with the school on an agenda towards improvement with support from the district (Bottoms & Schimdt-Davis, 2010). This means that the principals can have their own development plan based on the boundaries prescribed by the District Officials, while the district offers support for professional development and human resources (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2016). One may argue that such an approach lacks zeal for the crucial resources of instruction delivery and a clear vision of the curriculum delivery in schools (Wallace Foundation, 2013). It is highly improbable for principals to pursue a leadership style that is fore grounded on learning if the district officials are not supportive, not interested or pursuing other agendas (Wallace Foundation, 2013).

An approach that seems to be assuming importance in district support is one that advocates a district-wide approach which aims at developing school principals as instructional leaders (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). It is not only focusing on the district but stretches throughout the provincial and District Offices with the objective of improving instructional delivery, thereby enhancing the quality of learning in schools (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). This means that principals and their schools are understood to be part of an educational system which is inclusive of the national, provincial, district and circuit offices.

In contrast, the view that District Officials are to offer support also relies on their managerial competence. It is argued that district officials may not be able to hold principals accountable when they themselves lack the expertise required as managers of managers (Bottoms & Schimdt-Davis, 2010). It is possible that the lack of expertise may be caused by the effects of a top-down system that dominates in the Basic Education Department. This top-down approach causes a

situation where the districts maybe merely intermediaries between the national and provincial departments, thereby taking away the power to make decisions at district level. The role of the District Officials becomes one where they are cascades of what has been instructed upon them (Moorosi &Bantwini, 2016). Therefore, this situation finds District Officials having to be information delivery boys to schools, unable to effectively service schools for their academic achievements.

That stated, the literature indicates that highly supportive districts work in collaboration with the principals on major ideas about policies at district level, such as instructional improvements and changes in curriculum (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Honig, 2012; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016).

2.3.3 District Officials' support for school principals: the implications

From what the South African policy on districts states, one of the district officials' fundamental roles and responsibilities is to incessantly support principals, schools and parents (DBE, 2013). This is corroborated by the literature that states that principals should be given the capacity to create school environments that will be conducive to effective learning (Mathibe, 2007; Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Honig, 2012; Hull, 2012; Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Principals of under-performing schools cannot just turn them around without the necessary support from the District Officials. One of the essential ways that support may be enhanced is the recognition of principals as school leaders and authorities in their schools (Mathibe, 2007). Principals are in the best position to know what will work best for their schools. They are the custodians of the school's vision, mission and values (Mathibe, 2007).

This recognition and inclusion of principals will mold mechanism for collaboration between the districts and principals (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). Such an intervention will encourage school leaders to take pride in and ownership of new developments to be implemented by their schools. Moorosi and Bantwini (2016) found that principals were longing to see more of District Officials in their schools. The visibility was conceived as being crucial in conveying a message that someone cares about the operations of the school. However, much as the visibility of district officials is fundamental, it should be based on providing instructional support as mandated by the policy, not on a fault-finding mission (DBE, 2013). Another aspect which will be beneficial and

significant is an ongoing engagement in workshops and meetings for the principals within the district. These engagements will be underpinned by continuous professional development to assist principals to develop and execute their functions in schools effectively (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016).

2.4 Supportive measures by district officials to guide under-performing schools

2.4.1 Establishing procedures and standards

The Department of Basic Education and its districts should raise the stakes by establishing procedures and standards (Fashola, 2015). Fashola states that these standards and procedures will serve to define expectations for students, identify poor performance and hold schools accountable for student achievement (Fashola, 2015). District Officials should send strong signals to students about their own accountability for academic performance (Johnson, 2001). For example, the automatic promotion of students from grade to grade regardless of whether they have mastered necessary skills and knowledge should be halted. Holding schools and students more accountable for their academic performance is forcing districts to face the problem of low performance head-on.

District Officials do set standards and procedures to raise the stakes for student achievement in under-performing schools. Districts do identify and hold schools accountable for student achievement. However, the issue is whether the standards and procedures for schools are effective or not. According to a study conducted by Bantwini and Diko (2011), principals felt that they were held accountable for under-performance in their schools without being properly guided through professional development by the districts. Professional development can be understood as in-service training that focuses on ensuring that professionals are up to date with all current policies (among other things) to ensure competence among school leaders (Philips, 2004). District officials should capitalise on professional development for principals as a platform to improve teaching and learning.

i) *Professional development for principals (an international overview)*

The challenge of under-performing schools has become a national concern in many countries. In America, for instance, legislation was passed in 1999 which was named accountability

legislation (Elmore, 2003) This legislation holds local districts and its schools accountable for improving student achievement. One of the major focuses of the accountability legislation was on professional development, for enhancing leadership skills of principals of under-performing schools and instructional practices by the teachers.

Professional development is conceived to be a vital tool for change that is designed to develop student achievement. It focuses, among other things, on management practices (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). These management practices include organising, planning, supervising, financing, scheduling, budgeting and so on (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). One may argue that professional development should focus not only on management programmes, but on programmes that will focus on instructional leadership capacitation. These will be programmes that will advocate for principals to collaborate and be provided with a platform to reflect on the context of their professional practice with their peers (Elmore, 2003).

Professional development should afford principals an opportunity to discuss, work, and solve challenges with peers. This kind of in service-training should be fore-grounded on ways to strengthen principals' understanding of how to monitor school performance, implement standards and strengthen professional development for staff (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). Principals need to be provided with networking opportunities for the purposes of exchanging ideas and solving common problems (NSDC, 2000). These networking opportunities can be framed by collaborative efforts between institutions of higher learning and districts (Grogan & Andrews, 2002). School districts with schools that have been identified as under-performing take such approaches as vital in creating conditions for change towards an increase in student achievement.

ii) ***South African overview***

There is an escalating recognition that effective leadership is fundamental in turning around under-performing schools and providing students with good learning opportunities. There is a belief that no school can achieve good results in the absence of quality leadership. The South African body of literature supports the notion that valuable leadership and management are

critical in the development of good schools (DoE 1996; Christie, 2001, 2010; Roberts & Roach, 2006). The big debate is around the credentials of school leaders and managers.

In South Africa, school leaders and managers begin their careers as teachers, armed with just a teacher's qualification (Moorosi, 2011). Teachers then progress to managing schools with just teaching experience as a main requirement for leading schools (Mestry & Singh, 2007). The appointment of school principals is based on a good teaching record, with an assumption that this provides a foundation for school leadership and management (Bush & Oduro, 2006). It was for these reasons that an intervention by the Department of Education (1996) saw it necessary to recruit school managers to embark on formal leadership training. This was an Advanced Certificate in Education: School Leadership (ACE). It was part of a strategy to improve the standard of education and develop confidence in school leaders. It was also part of an ongoing professional development for the school leaders.

Although the ACE pilot study was discontinued, the researcher will focus on one of the pillars of the ACE programme that is still relevant for turning around and improving schools. The ACE programme for school leaders promoted a high level of networking amongst school leaders, both at local and district level. There is a view that networking is one of the ideal models for leadership learning (Bush, 2007), because networking provides a strong platform for sharing and transferring ideas. Including the ACE programme the notion of school managers working together in clusters is also grounded in international practice (Brundett, 2006).

In viewing the networking framework of the ACE programme, the researcher contends that networking is good provided those involved have a clear focus on what they are networking about. When there is a formally assessed programme that leaders are engaged in, their focus could be on the completion of set tasks. This does not ensure a sustained culture of networking based on sharing experiences in order to improve schools (Brundett, 2006). This means that professional development is afforded to principals, but not much is done to measure the effectiveness of such initiatives by the Department.

2.4.2 A Focus on learning

Under-performing schools need to make changes that will allow them to deliver high quality curriculum and instruction so that all children reach challenging academic standards. In this

regard, District Officials should aid these schools by assisting them to gain control of their learning environment. For schools to do this they need to effectively implement instructional changes: issues of learner discipline, a high level of absenteeism, and the learners' safety need to be properly addressed. This means that District Officials should assist school leaders in enforcing policies in this regard (Jones, 2003), such as policies that foster "zero tolerance" for violence and drugs. Furthermore, school uniforms and effective classroom management strategies set an environment conducive to teaching and learning (Johnson, 2001). Students should be given respect through assigning them responsibilities as members of the school community.

District Officials should also help by creating professional development programmes aligned with the content of curriculum and focused on improving instruction. Professional development is often neglected in under-performing schools. For professional development to be effective it must centre on the classroom (Elmore, 2007). For instance, teachers need to be involved in PLCs where they can network with other teachers. In these communities they share information about the subject content and skills they need to improve classroom instruction. When teachers engage in these PLCs they can work collaboratively towards student achievement.

The focus on learning also requires district officials to assist schools in implementing comprehensive school reform programmes. Creating such a programme requires change in many aspects of a school (Elmore, 2007). These aspects include curriculum, school governance, community, school relationships, staff development, technology and parental involvement (Elmore, 2007).

i) Professional learning communities (PLCs)

The notion of instructional leadership that focuses on educational leaders as centres of expertise, power, knowledge and authority cannot yield desirable organisational improvements (Spillane, 2006). Schools have become platforms of unpredictability and change that require interventions that seek to develop both staff and learners (Spillane, 2006). This is where PLCs play an essential part in seeking solutions for school improvement (Hord, 2003). The development of

PLCs seems to be shifting away from the hierarchy of who knows better than the other, and having all stakeholders contributing towards improved learning and a clear focus on results (Dufour, 2004).

The role of the district is to encourage and support the development of PLCs and continual learning among leaders (Senge, 1990). This support and encouragement can be given during leadership workshops that focus, among other things, on professional development. District Officials can be hands-on in ensuring that the traditional top-down approach to the vision of an organisation is avoided. Leaders from the district need to encourage leadership that aims at sharing the leadership burden (Sergiovanni, 1994).

ii) Conceptualisation of PLCs and its implication for the school

PLCs can be viewed as a platform where teachers may transform the way they execute their classroom practice. This means that having PLCs in a school can have an impact on both the teachers and learners (DBE, 2011). However, with all the good intentions of the PLC there are a few factors that can enhance the operation of PLCs. This is due to the contestation terrains between the school dynamics, politics and policy versus PLCs. Guskey (2003) writes that for a very long-time, schools have not had a clear understanding of why they required professional development through the operation of PLCs. Without a clear purpose, this can create a situation where PLCs are not resilient enough towards all the school dynamics that can badly affect their existence. It is for this reason that members of a PLC in a school need to have a clear vision and mission for their existence.

The Department of Basic Education clearly stipulates that district officials, principals, HODs, higher education institutions and teacher unions are all responsible for the establishment of PLCs (DBE, 2011). The Department also states that the success of any PLC lies with its participants, who are the teachers (DBE, 2011). However, policy, again, is not practice. From the researcher's observation in her context, there has not been any visible mechanisms through which district leaders have affected student achievement. This is a problem, because it may create a situation where school leaders are not at the forefront of the operation of PLCs. When this happens, it

creates contextual dynamics that may make it difficult for teachers to succeed in the development and operation of PLCs.

A PLC can be defined as a systematic process where teachers collaborate for improving their classroom practice (Marzano, 2003). Within this process, teachers are committed towards a focus on learning and ensuring that students learn rather than just be taught (Barth, 2010). Ensuring that students learn is achieved by teachers improving their knowledge and skills through professional dialogue, collaborative study and exchange of expertise (Dufour, 2014). PLCs also emphasise developing teachers' educational objectives, accomplishments and students' achievement through intensified leadership and teaching (Jackson, 2000). The objectives of the PLC cannot be attained if members do not share values and vision.

Shared values and vision are an ever-present belief within the PLC as they demonstrate how powerful such conformity can be. This is because the notion of shared values and vision explains the school's improvement and effectiveness (Lumby, 2006). It is exactly what vision is shared, and what the common values are, that underpin it that constitute the potency of the PLC (Stark, 2009). For example, the collaboration of teachers for students' attainment is the shared vision which values effective teaching as a vehicle for school development. Within PLCs the focus becomes the delivery of the core business of a school, which is teaching and learning, and on how teaching and learning are done through what teachers learn.

2.4.3 Building school capacity: systems support for the process of change

District Officials' support is essential for practices such as aligning curriculum, classroom practices and professional development. This is because such practices build a sense of teamwork amongst staff members and foster partnerships between parents and the community (Haslam, 2014). Furthermore, a cycle of continuous improvement may be achieved using performance data to inform choices (Jones, 2013). Building capacity for under-performing schools involves setting priorities at the district level such as ensuring strong leadership in the school through recruiting good instructional leaders as principals (Haslam, 2014), and promoting policies that encourage teachers' commitment to reform. This means that the district should appoint teachers who will be enthusiastic about change and willing to work in under-performing

schools (Levine, 2010). Districts need to be flexible in allowing teachers a chance to leave a school if they do not want to participate in the school reform process (Levine, 2010).

District Officials should use their resources strategically through assisting under-performing schools with re-organisation of their resources by coordinating and concentrating classroom instruction (Haslam, 2004).

Moreover, District Officials should assist schools to use performance data for improvement. Using performance data helps with identifying patterns of failure, diagnosing problems and matching concrete solutions to educational needs (Elmore, 2007). This means that appropriate improvement strategies will be developed, and continuous improvement monitored. Most importantly, it is imperative to understand that schools cannot work in isolation, so collaborating with the community should be encouraged by the district. Involving stakeholders such as parents, local businesses, colleges and universities could be invaluable sources of support (Elmore, 2007). This practice could raise the student performance, and in the long run turn around under-performing schools.

2.5 School turnaround strategies for under-performing schools

School turnaround strategies in this context mean a quick and dramatic change at the school and system levels (Robinson & Buntrock, 2011; Duke, 2012). Effective turnaround strategies include: more engaged and supportive communities; increased time for collaboration; strong and aligned instructional programmes; supportive and safe school environments; operational flexibility and capacity building; and providing principals with freedom to act (Robinson & Buntrock, 2011; US Department of Education, 2011; Duke, 2012; Sparks, 2012; Trujillo & Renee, 2012). It is imperative for the district officials to work together with all the important stakeholders to ensure that a school is transformed.

It is also important to realise that schools have different needs and will be at different points in their process of improvement. Herman (2008) writes that District Officials need to provide a tiered approach to the under-performing schools. This refers to an approach that has several levels or grades in the hierarchy of an organisation. This approach is targeted to provide the most intensive support to the lowest performing schools.

Off our turnaround models, a district leader may choose one in the process of accomplishing improvement strategies. The **closure model** advocates a situation where the under-performing school is closed, and all its students placed in other schools that are higher achieving within the district. The **restart model** converts the school to an educational management organisation. The **transformation model** requires replacing the principal and taking further steps to increase teacher and school leader effectiveness through professional development; instituting comprehensive curricular reforms; increasing learning time; creating community-oriented schools; and providing operational flexibility and sustained support (US Department of Education, 2012, p.1). The **turnaround model** requires replacing the principal; granting the new principal sufficient operational flexibility to fully implement a comprehensive approach; hiring staff and no more than 50% of the original teachers (US Department of Education, 2010; Center on Education Policy, 2012; Duke 2012; Trujillo & Renee, 2012;).

Some of these turnaround strategies may or may not work, depending on the contextual background and the political dynamics of a country. In the researcher's school, for example, when the principal was removed it created more havoc in the school. This is because not much was explained to staff, parents and learners as important stakeholders of the school. The teachers' union in the school was at loggerheads with the Department of Basic Education's district director. This strategy created uncertainty and resentment towards the new principal.

The closure model in South Africa may create tension because the number of students in the higher performing school will be increased, causing a lot of pressure on the teachers. However, providing sustained support and increasing opportunities for professional development will assist even the most struggling teacher. When this is intensified, a positive transformation in a school can be realised.

2.6 Factors affecting the supportive role of the District Officials

The education policy on district support stipulates that one of the major roles of the District Officials is to work collaboratively with schools in ensuring that learners have access to a progressively higher quality of education (DBE, 2013). However, policy, yet again, is not practice. In the researcher's personal experience within her professional context, District Officials have been unable to provide relevant support to schools. It is for this reason that this

study aims at uncovering the challenges faced by the district officials in providing effective support to schools.

One of the major reasons for the crippling of the intended policy on district support is that there is no relationship between the number of schools and the District Officials in each district to provide effective support to teachers (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). The large number of schools in each district makes it a mountain-climb to provide professional development on new curriculum policies, monitor the implementation of these policies, and provide continuous school-based support, to mention only a few of the difficulties that overwhelm district officials (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). In their study, Bantwini and Moorosi (2018) found that District Officials (subject advisers) at times need to double-up in different phases, according to demand. This means that it is difficult for subject advisers to accomplish their goals when they have a huge load in relation to what is possible to accomplish. It means that one phase must suffer while district officials try to cater for the needs of the other, causing long-term damage to learners' education.

Among other challenges that incapacitate District Officials' mission to support schools are the teachers who do not have a clear understanding of the new curriculum reforms. Teachers need to be confident in class to have a good chance of imparting knowledge to their learners. However, if teachers are unsure of what they are doing they can become highly frustrated in the process of teaching, and thus damaging to learners (Davis, 2003).The few workshops that District Officials are able to conduct give them the impression that teachers understand the new curriculum reforms, but when teachers face challenges no one is there to assist them (Bantwini, 2010). This situation retards progress in schools, causing major damage to learners. It is for these reasons that the Department of Basic Education needs to hire more district officials to ensure that adequate support is provided to schools that require it the most.

2.7 Theoretical framework

At the genesis of any research study, it is of fundamental importance to underpin the research with a relevant theory (Sinclair, 2007). A theoretical framework can be understood as a formation or structure that supports the theory underlying a research study (Labaree, 2009). This study is underpinned by instructional leadership theory.

2.8.1 Instructional leadership theory

Instructional leadership can be understood as the leadership that focuses on the management of the curriculum and school principal's instructions (Bush, 2009). It is the leadership that is framed by activities involving the principal-teacher interactions with a clear focus on improving the quality of teaching and learning (Kaparou & Bush, 2016). When a principal's instructional leadership is reinforced it becomes a fundamental contributor to improved teaching (Day & Sammons, 2016). The view is that instructional leadership is essential in turning schools around through improved student learning (Bush, 2009; Day & Sammons, 2016; Kaparou & Bush, 2016).

The importance of a principal's instructional leadership to improving a school's teaching cannot be overlooked. It is a fundamental contributor to student achievement (Heck, 1992; Leithwood Louis, Anderson, &Wahlstrom et al., 2004; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006). There are various definitions of instructional leadership, but scholars generally concur that it involves school leaders (principals) working continuously with teachers. The basis of this collaborative work is to examine results of the quality of their teaching and use those results to improve how they teach ((Heck, 1992; Leithwood, Louis, Anderson, &Wahlstrom, et al., 2004; Leithwood, Day, Sammons, Harris, & Hopkins, 2006).

Principals are described as contributing to the improvement of the quality of teaching and learning in their schools. This is done through giving feedback and praise after observing their classrooms and using an inquiry-based approach that encourages teachers and principals to reflect on their practice (Marsh, 2005; Mangin, 2007; Graczewski, Knudson, & Holzman, 2009; Portin, 2009; Supovitz, 2009). It is for these reasons that the principals require support to build their capacity for instructional leadership.

Instructional leadership has often been associated with school-based leadership as opposed to district leadership. In this study, instructional leadership theory is also viewed from the lens of (Belden, Russonello, & Stewart et al., 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008; Augustine, Gonzalez, Ikemoto, Russell, & Zellmanet al.,2009), which aligns instructional leadership with leadership at the district level. This gives instructional leadership another term that this study adopts, which is district-wide instructional leadership rather than school-based instructional leadership (Belden

Russonello& Stewart et al., 2005; Rorrer et al., 2008; Augustine Gonzalez, Ikemoto, Russel & Zellman, et al., 2009). This is not to suggest that instructional leadership is distanced from the school level; instructional decisions are taken at district level to provide support for schools and teachers.

This view of district-wide instructional leadership also draws from Cuban (1983), who argues that district officials play a crucial role in creating preconditions for school improvement. This means that there needs to be collaboration between the district and the principals in constituting what exactly is entailed for the instructional leadership to be properly executed at school level (Cuban, 1983). Instructional leadership is about keeping all activities of teaching and learning at the forefront of decision making (Leithwood, 2008).

A district and its officials are at the centre of instructional leadership, though its implementation at school level. This study chooses a lens that views instructional leadership as a system-wide approach through acknowledging the interrelatedness of elements within a system (Senge, 2006). School districts act as agents of change that enhance reform efforts from provincial and central governments within the district itself and in schools (Rorrer, et al., 2008). The policy on district support also puts District Officials at the centre of curriculum delivery. As part of instructional support provided by the District Officials, school visits and classroom observations are emphasised (DBE, 2013). The district-wide instructional leadership is underpinned by the capacity building and generation of will to succeed as vital aspects of instructional leadership at district level (Rorrer et al., 2008). These two aspects are essential in assisting the district to bridge the organisational development and policy implementation (McLaughlin, 1987). District-wide instructional leadership is about creating vision and goals to support instruction by developing capacity through professional development, planning, communication and collaboration that provide support for instruction at school level (Rorrer et al., 2008; Augustine et al., 2009; Honig, 2012). District -wide instructional leadership aims at ensuring that there are no distractions for school leaders that might shift their focus from teachers and learners (Leithwood, 2010).

2.8 Chapter Summary

This chapter has defined leadership to understand the role of District Officials. It has discussed District Officials' roles towards under-performing secondary schools. It has highlighted that District Officials are mandated by the Department of Basic Education to work collaboratively with principals to give management and professional support (DBE, 2013). District Officials should make use of initiatives such as professional development and PLCs in their quest to make support effective. There are great benefits in professionally developing leaders and encouraging the use of PLCs at school level. For instance, it affords leaders and teachers a platform for sharing ideas and having a clear focus on learning (Dufour, 2004). Such support by the district may raise standards at school level, creating an atmosphere conducive to teaching and learning, and improving results.

It is imperative for school leaders to be professionally developed towards using all components of leadership for the improvement of results in under-performing schools. Influence plays a major role in ensuring that the vision and mission of a school as an organisation is realised.

For a school to achieve excellent results, it requires a leadership that is strongly rooted in instruction that enhances a culture of teaching and learning. However, a focus on instruction alone is not enough for improving a culture of teaching and learning. A culture of teaching and learning can also be improved through distributing tasks among members of an organisation. It is for these reasons that this study has used instructional leadership theory as befitting in the process transforming under-performing secondary schools.

CHAPTER THREE

RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY

3.1 Introduction

Chapter 2 provided an in-depth review of related literature and the theoretical framework that underpins this study. The purpose of this chapter is to discuss the research design and methodology of the study. The chapter unfolds by delving into the paradigm of the research study, focusing on the epistemological, ontological and methodological location of the paradigm. The chapter also provides a justification for the research methodology used for this qualitative research study on the experiences of principals on the support that District Officials extend to under-performing schools. Qualitative research design provided the researcher with a deeper understanding of the principals' experiences of how their schools are supported by their District Officials. This chapter also discusses research techniques and steps that were applied in the process of generating and analysing data. The trustworthiness of the research and the ethical considerations it entailed form part of the discussion in this chapter. Finally, a summary of the chapter is provided.

3.2 Research questions

This chapter seeks to use an approach that will be suitable in answering the following research questions:

i) What do principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?
ii) How do principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

3.3 The interpretive research paradigm

The term paradigm has been dissected differently by various scholars. MacNaught, Rolfe &Siraj-Blatchford (2011) view a research paradigm as a body that comprises three elements: the nature of knowledge as a belief, the criteria for validity and the methodology for validity. On the other hand, a research paradigm is referred to as a research methodology, ontology or even epistemology (Neuman, 2000; Creswell, 2013). In simpler terms, ontology refers to different beliefs that reflect and provide an interpretation (Creswell, 2013). Epistemology refers to how knowledge is constructed, including the nature and the limitation of knowledge in a field of study (Creswell, 2013). Mackenzie and Knipe (2016) categorise research paradigms as positivist, critical, transformative, emancipatory, constructivist and interpretive. In this classification, a research paradigm is conceived as providing a researcher with a lens to use in viewing and understanding the world.

After carefully considering different paradigms, the researcher chose to work within the interpretive paradigm. This was because as an interpretive, the researcher sought to understand the world through human experience (Yanow& Schwartz-Shea, 2011) by aligning this study with the epistemological assumptions of the interpretive paradigm, which is that the participant and the researcher are interlocked in a process of talking, reading, writing and listening (Merriam, 2005). The researcher sampled principals of under-performing secondary schools, since in an interpretive paradigm there is no single truth and the truth is subjective (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). This also forms part of the ontological assumption which states that there are multiple realities underpinned by people's views, experiences, knowledge and interpretations (Maxwell, 2005). Thus, the interpretive paradigm provided the researcher with a lens to uncover a full understanding of the district's supportive role towards under-performing schools through principals' perspectives.

An interpretive paradigm involves methodological approaches that allow an opportunity for the concerns, voice and practices of the participants to be heard (Cole, 2006). This study allowed the principals of under-performing schools to share their experiences on receiving support from District Officials. The researcher ensured that she engaged and interacted with the participants and allowed them to fully express their views and experiences about the studied phenomenon.

3.4 Research design and methodology

3.4.1 Research design

A qualitative research approach focuses on methods of investigation that consider the participants' culture, history, emotional lives and interactive activities (Berg & Lune, 2014). It is a step-by-step process of how the research study will unfold. In Burns and Grove's (2013) view, research design serves as a potpourri of how data will be generated, what instruments will be used, and how they will be used. There are three different types of research design method: qualitative, quantitative and mixed (Creswell, 2009). The main objective of this research study is to explain the case or the phenomenon by exploring the participants' experiences in each situation (Stake, 2010). A qualitative research approach was therefore the most appropriate choice. The researcher engaged in situations from the viewpoint of the participants (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014) because it allowed her first-hand experience of how the District Officials assist under-performing schools. Through the qualitative research approach, she was able to understand the supportive role of the District Officials from the perspectives of the principals of under-performing schools.

3.4.2 Research methodology

Research methodology can be understood as systematic techniques used to uncover results of a research problem (Stake, 2010). It is about gathering, categorising and analysing data (Polit & Hungler, 2004). Another view of a research methodology is the theory of correct scientific decisions (Maxwell, 2005). This means that a research methodology is about making calculated decisions about what instruments to use to generate data, how data that is generated is categorised, and in the end how the data is analysed to arrive at findings that seek to answer the research problem. For this study, the methodology involved all the steps of how the research was done.

The research methodology for this study is a case study. To justify this choice of methodology, it is necessary to first define what a case and case study are. According to Yin (2002), a case can be defined as an existing phenomenon within its real-life context. Stake (2010) views a case as

something that the researchers should inquire into and treat as an object rather than a process; it should be viewed as an integrated system. Similarly, Merriam (2005) defines a case as a bounded system, a single unit around which there are boundaries. This means that a case is an experience occurring in a bounded context. It means that the researcher can name anything a case provided she is specific about the phenomenon of interest and fences in what she is enquiring about. A case study is defined by some scholars (Merriam, 2005; Simmons, 2009; Stake, 2010; Bertram & Christiansen, 2014) as an in-depth exploration from various experiences of the intricacies and uniqueness of a project, institution, policy, system or programme in a real-life situation.

A case study was appropriate for this thesis because it afforded the researcher an opportunity to engage with principals of under-performing schools in understanding their view of their experiences. The case in this study is District Officials' support of under- performing schools; the boundaries are under-performing schools in Umlazi District.

3.4.3 The researcher

The researcher is a music teacher who has worked for 11 years within the Department of Education/Basic Education. Currently she is working for Edinvest Holdings under Canaan College, as a Deputy Head of the college. She holds a Bachelor of Arts (Music) degree, a Postgraduate Certificate in Education and a Bachelor of Education (Honours) degree specialising in Education Leadership, Management and Policy. The researcher has acquired the necessary skills to carry out this research study and has had no direct relationship with the participants which might have led to bias in this study.

3.4.4 Sampling

In a qualitative study such as this one, paying attention to sampling is critical in ensuring and achieving the thoroughness which should prevail throughout the research process (Cohen, Manion & Morrison, 2011). This means that in a qualitative study, sampling is more of a deliberate process than a random process. Sampling refers to deciding on the kind of people, events, settings and behaviours to include in the study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). It also involves different strategies or methods used to recruit the kind of people that the study may require.

These methods can be categorised as random sampling, stratified sampling, convenience sampling and purposive sampling. **Random sampling** refers to a situation where any member of the research population has an equal chance of being incorporated in the sample; **stratified sampling** refers to a sample that represents all pertinent subgroups of the population; **convenience sampling** is when participants are chosen because they meet the study criteria, and are readily available and easy to reach for the researcher; **purposive sampling** refers to sampling participants that will serve a particular purpose of the study (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014).

For this study, purposive and convenience sampling were employed. This is because purposive sampling is used when a researcher selects participants based on the population's characteristics and a researched study's objective (Braun & Clarke, 2013). Purposive sampling can also be conceived as subjective, judgmental and selective. On the other hand, convenience sampling is not driven by a particular purpose like purposive sampling, but it means choosing participants because they are convenient and easy for the researcher to reach (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). All participants of this study were selected conveniently based on their geographical accessibility and willingness to participate in the study.

Purposive sampling was used in selecting five principals from Umlazi District, this is because these principals are serviced by the same group of District Officials. Cohen et al. (2011) write that researchers use purposive sampling to handpick participants based on their judgement and knowledge, which may serve as a critical asset in the researcher's study. In this regard, the principals possessed an in-depth knowledge of essential issues regarding the support offered to their schools by the district. The principals sampled for this study lead the secondary schools that have been termed as under-performing schools owing to their obtaining less than 60% in their Grade 12 results within the past five years. These principals fit a purposive criterion because they serve as the gatekeepers of their schools and communicate directly with the District Officials. They were therefore able to give me a detailed description of their experiences in their contexts.

3.4.5 Data generation method

Data generation methods refer to the processes taken by the researcher in generating data using the appropriate and relevant sources in finding out answers to the research problem (DiCicco-

Bloom & Crabtree, 2006). These relevant sources include the human participants, organisations, events, and electronic media to name a few. Data for this research study were generated using face to face semi-structured interviews. Semi-structured interviews were appropriate for this research study because they allowed the participants to fully express their views during scheduled meetings. This assisted the researcher in gathering adequate information from the participants through probing them as issues arose in scheduled meetings.

3.4.5.1 Semi-structured interviews

Semi-structured interviews for this study served as a prime data generation method. Using semi-structured interviews in a qualitative study becomes essential if a researcher seeks to make meaning of how people understand the world, they live in. They also created a platform for observing the intentions, feelings and thoughts of the participants (Cohen et al., 2011). Another reason for employing interviews as a data generation method was that it allowed the researcher to view the studied phenomenon from the perspective of the participants. This is because the researcher was able to learn their thoughts through their Stories. Semi-structured interviews allow for triangulation of data gathered from other sources (Lincoln & Guba, 2005).

For this qualitative study, the researcher conducted all the interviews with the selected principals of under-performing secondary schools. The principals were first contacted through a visit for requesting their expertise as participants in my study. During this visit, which included explaining the details of the study, the researcher also solicited their consent and fixed appointment dates for interviews. All the principals were interviewed in their offices at their schools. The interviews aimed at finding out their understanding of what the district ought to offer them as under-performing schools, specifically the support programmes made available to them and their schools. Through interviews the researcher was able to find out how the support is made available to under-performing schools. Through the interviews, participants' experiences were uncovered in depth to emphasise issues of trustworthiness (Marshall &Rossman, 2006).

3.5 Data analysis

Data analysis is a process of transforming the generated data into findings (Bertram and Christiansen, 2014). This process also involves working from the raw information, identifying the patterns and developing a base for communicating what the data reveal (Patton , 2002). The

data for this study were analysed using thematic analysis, which is a process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2013). All interviews were audio-recorded with the participants' permission and were transcribed verbatim. This assisted with descriptive codes for analysis which aimed at identifying, linking and labeling the interviews to determine themes and patterns. The process of coding included three stages: open, axial and selective (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2007). Open coding is the process of generating initial concepts from data; axial coding is the process of developing and linking concepts into conceptual families; and selective coding refers to the formalising of these relationships into theoretical frameworks (Strauss & Corbin, 1998; O'Donoghue, 2007). The codes were then divided into categories that were evident in the data. The categories that were distinctive were grouped into themes (Creswell, 2009; Saldana, 2009). These themes were used as subtitles to group the findings of this study.

3.6 Ethical Considerations

Permission to conduct this research study was obtained from the University Research Board, the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Basic Education and participants. For participants to grant informed consent, issues of voluntary participation, confidentiality, informed consent, anonymity and non-maleficence were discussed in detail (Bertram & Christiansen, 2014). Participants were made aware of their right to withdraw from the study at any time, without explanation or prejudice (Shenton, 2004). The researcher assured the participants that the digitally recorded interviews would be stored in a well-secured place. The issue of maintaining anonymity was settled by using pseudonyms. To ensure credibility, the researcher disclosed her background to the participants to allow the openness and trust which guaranteed honesty from the participants (Shenton, 2004).

3.7 Validity and reliability/trustworthiness

To render a qualitative study valid, it must be checked through stages for trustworthiness, i.e. for its credibility, transferability, dependability and confirmability (Shenton, 2004).

Credibility deals with the focus of the research and refers to confidence in how well data and processes of analysis address the intended focus (Polit & Hungler, 1999). In fulfilling this

criterion, the researcher used specific sources (principals of under-performing secondary schools and District Officials) in order to ensure that data generated addressed the focus of the study.

Transferability refers to the extent to which the findings can be transferred to other settings or groups (Polit & Hungler, 1999). This was enhanced through a clear description of the context and the thorough presentation of the characteristics of the participants. In her study, the researcher was not vigorously seeking for transferability. However, through her execution of the task, her wish is that the findings can be transferred to similar contexts.

Dependability refers to a situation where a researcher can account for why there may be variations in the study (Brown & Dowling, 2008). The researcher ensured that the research design, methodology and data generation method conveyed adequate information, and that there was fitness for purpose. This means that the method of data generation (semi-structured interviews) was such as to ensure that the researcher was able to generate the data she needed. Furthermore, she employed techniques used by other scholars in conducting research of a similar nature.

Confirmability is the in-depth methodological description to allow reliability of research results to be scrutinised (Shenton, 2004). To improve confirmability, it is vital for the research process to be transparent for another researcher to reach similar conclusions. Interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed, and the participants' voices were presented verbatim.

3.8 Limitations

Simon (2011), states that limitations are the weaknesses that hinder the researcher. A limitation in this study was that because the principals were busy, some of them resorted to giving me interview times within teaching hours. That was a brief challenge because during teaching hours there were many activities in the school; for example, principals needed to keep on answering phone calls and door knocks from the teachers. However, the researcher tried to remain calm and patient during the interviews, and not lose the essence of the subject matter.

3.9 Chapter Summary

This chapter described the research design and methodology and discussed the research paradigm. It also discussed the issue of trustworthiness in research, and how to ensure it. Ethical

issues and a limitation in the study were also included. The following chapter presents the analysis of data and findings from the field.

CHAPTER 4

DATA ANALYSIS, FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

4.1 Introduction

In the previous chapter, the research design and methodology employed in the study were explained. This chapter discusses the findings and analysis from the data generated through semi-structured interviews and documents received from principals of schools. The findings and discussions of the data generated aimed at addressing the following critical research questions:

i) What do principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

ii) How do principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

To remind the reader, the researcher restates the title of the study: *The role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools: Perspectives of school principals.* The study seeks to achieve the objectives of exploring what the principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools and how do they experience this role. In the presentation of discussions, verbatim quotations are used to ensure that the participants' voices are not lost.

4.2 Profiling the participants

There were five principals who participated in this study: two from the Umlazi area and three from the Umbumbulu area, both areas in Umlazi District.

PARTICIPANT	SCHOOL	YEARS EXPERIENCE IN EDUCATION	YEARS IN CURRENT POSITION	LEARNER ENROLMENT
1. Mr Kgosinkwe	Khamanzi Secondary	20	12	400
2. Mr Mbhense	Sondela Secondary	15	5	550
3. Mr Fangano	Siyabonelela Secondary	13	4	866
4. Mr Masango	Awande Secondary	27	12	788
5. Mr Ndaba	Ziyeza Secondary	26	12	1900

MrKgosinkwe

Mr Ksosinkwe is the Principal of Khamanzi High School in Umbumbulu. He has been a principal for over 10 years. Khamanzi High School has an enrolment of about 400 learners. The school is in a semi-rural area with various other high schools as neighbours.

MrMbhense

Mr Mbhense is the recently appointed, young and energetic Principal of Sondeza Secondary School. He was an educator in this school for quite some time before leaving to work in another school as a Head of Department, and later came back to be Principal in this school. Sondeza Secondary School has an enrolment of 550 learners.

Mr Fangano

Mr Fangano, the Principal of Siyabonelela High School in Umbumbulu, was recently appointed as Principal after the former Principal retired. Before taking up the post he was Deputy Principal for five years. Siyabonelela High School has an enrolment of 866 learners.

Mr Masango

Mr Masango, is the Principal of Awande Secondary School in Umlazi Township. He has been Principal for 12 years, during which the school has been experiencing a fluctuation in Grade 12 results depending on the kind of learners they have had each year. However, the school has been underperforming for the last three years in succession.

Mr Ndaba

Mr Ndaba, is the Principal of Ziyeza High School in Umlazi Township. He has been a Principal for three years. Before joining Ziyeza High School, he was the Principal of a school in Umlazi that he moved from a 20% to an 80% pass rate in three years. Mr Ndaba also holds a very prominent position in one of the teacher unions in the Ethekwini region. Ziyeza High School has enrolment of 1900 learners.

Pass percentage per school in the last five years

School name	**2015**	**2016**	**2017**	**2018**	**2019**
Ziyeza High School	**29%**	**33%**	**43%**	**56%**	**54%**
Siyabonelela High School	**51.3%**	**50%**	**48%**	**55%**	**55.9%**
Sondeza High School	**23%**	**31.5%**	**41%**	**43.2%**	**40.3%**
Khamanzi High School	**52.3%**	**49%**	**56%**	**51.9%**	**54%**
Awanda Secondary school	**56%**	**51.3%**	**47%**	**52%**	**54%**

4.3 Presentation and the discussion of findings

During the process of data generation from the interviews and document analyses, the following themes emerged: The principals' understanding of under-performing secondary school; The District Officials responsible for supporting under-performing secondary schools; Principals lived experiences of the support received from District Officials and the benchmark used to measure the effectiveness of support/intervention programs to under-performing schools. These themes are discussed below.

4.3.1 The principals' understanding of under-performing secondary schools

Participants in this study were asked: what is your understanding of an under-performing secondary school? This question assisted the researcher to find out if the participants knew and understood why and how their schools had been identified as under-performing schools. The data generated revealed a sense of uncertainty on the part of the principals as to what percentage was the benchmark for under-performance in South African secondary schools, because there was no single percentage that emerged from the responses. The benchmark percentage ranged from 60% to 75% according to the participants. This means that a school that obtains less than 60% in Grade 12 results is termed an under-performing school. Mr Kgosinkwe of Khamanzi Secondary School offered the following view:

> *"According to the Department [brief silence and sigh]… any school that obtains less than 65% in the matric results is regarded as an under-performing school. However, recently that has changed from 65% to 70%. Once you score less than 70% you are termed an underperforming school."*

On the other hand, Mr Mbhense of Sondeza Secondary School had this to say:

> *"When a school receives a less than 75% pass in matric, it is identified as an under-performing school. A few years back, when I was still a HOD in this school, it used to be 60%. Then it went up to 65%, and then it went up to 75%. What is surprising is that they don't even look at the quality of results that you are producing as a school.*

Mr Fangano of Siyabonelela Secondary School had this view:

> *"The benchmark used by the Department of Education to identify a school as under-performing is the school's Grade 12 results. If your school produces results that are less than 60% in Grade 12 then your school falls into the bracket of a poor performing school. … What's surprising is that we cannot do miracles in Grade 12 when a lot of damage happens in grades before Grade*

12…. Not much is done to monitor what is done in grades before Grade 12, yet the result is a subject of scrutiny."

When I had an interview with Mr Masango of Awanda Secondary School, his response sounded like that of someone who spends a lot of time familiarising himself with policies. When I asked him, what mechanism is used to identify an under-performing school, he responded:

"*You see, ma'am, er, section 58(b) of the South African Schools Act talks about the under-performance in high schools. It states that if Grade 12 results in your school for that current year are below 65% then you fall into the bracket of an under-performing school. I want to emphasise this: not any other grade but Grade 12. Once the school is termed as such, you are then referred to section 58(b), which was amended to add what it is that the school needs to do when it is an under-performing school."*

What Mr Masango stated was later corroborated by Mr Ndaba of Ziyeza Comprehensive Technical High School when he said:

"The department uses a certain percentage from how the Grade 12 learners of your school have performed. Now the benchmark is 65%. When you are within this benchmark, you are then called a T65 school, which is basically a terminology used to identify underperforming secondary schools."

According to the South African Schools Act, No. 84 of 1996, section 58(b): "A secondary school is deemed under-performing if its percentage pass in the National Senior Certificate examination falls below 60%." According to the participants the 60% benchmark is further increased by the District Director to urge the principals of schools to aim higher. When the District Director inflates the 60% benchmark, it creates confusion on the part of the principals about the exact pass percentage used as a benchmark. One of the participants thought that the District Director believes that if schools get too comfortable about the 60% they might fall to the 50s. It is therefore better to inflate the percentage to create much more room for hard work.

When principals of under-performing secondary schools do not understand exactly what benchmark is being used to identify their schools, it means communication lines between the district and the schools are not entirely open. Communication is one of the vital elements in district wide instructional leadership practice.

From the instructional leadership view, there has been a fundamental shift in the way leaders view their leadership roles and responsibilities when interacting with other stakeholders and placing teaching and learning at forefront of education (Marsh, 2005). These leadership roles and responsibilities are framed by shared governance, time for collaboration and quality teaching and learning practices (Graczewski, Knudson, & Holzman, 2009) Collaboration and shared governance are essential in solidifying the collective efforts between the principals and districts towards attaining academic improvement (Marsh, 2005; Mangin, 2007; Graczewski, Knudson, & Holzman, 2009; Portin, 2009; Supovitz, 2009). This means that there needs to be collective efforts between the district and principals in decisions taken as strategies towards academic improvement. When there is shared decision making, all stakeholders (districts and principals) take ownership of the decisions, thereby strengthening the implementation process.

Mr Ndaba's comment was a bit on the fence, the researcher felt that he was very careful with his words. However, what he said highlighted that there is no shared decision making between the district and the principals of schools. Instead of having active engagements framed by collective decision making, Mr Ndaba felt that there were not actively engaged in decisions and matters that are crucial to their schools. Mr Ndaba commented:

> *"The district comes up with its own strategies to turn around the under-performing schools. When we are called for meetings, nothing is expected from us; we go there to be informed of the decisions by the district. Then ours is to design turn around strategies that will be in-line with the district's projections. … Yes, we are urged to work hard towards the improvement of results."*

The principal of Yande Secondary School (Mr Mbhense) exclaimed:

> *"Ey, ma'am! It's an intimidating situation being called to those under-performing schools meetings. There is no collective or collaborative effort between us and the district officials. There is a general feeling that we are sinners, and therefore we have no voice."*

This top-down approach between the district and the principals' means there is no shared decision making, is not practiced between the district and the school principals. Issues such as collaboration, collectivity and coordination that involve the need to coalesce fluid and open relations among educational practitioners are not observed (Harris, 2012). If the district wants to push up the percentage pass rate; that should be a collective decision between all the stakeholders towards clear strategies of achieving the new benchmark rates.

The participants raised their concern that the DBE seemed to put too much emphasis on the Grade 12 results and ignored the fact that these results were influenced by teaching and learning that had occurred in the previous grades. This concern coincides with the view of other scholars. Chinsamy (2013) argues that under-performing secondary schools are identified through measuring the quality of Grade 12 results at the expense of other grades leading to Grade 12. It is further emphasised that Grade 12 results are the only results that are published in national newspapers. Schools with a low percentage pass become the subject of blaming and shaming by both the public and the district (Chinsamy, 2013). Grade 12 results are a mirror image of what has been done in the lower grades leading to Grade 12. If there is not much done to cement the foundation in lower grades, achieving success in Grade 12 only becomes an unattainable dream. The participants' concern is one that requires attention from the DBE.

4.3.2 The District Officials responsible for supporting under-performing secondary schools.

What emerged from the findings was that there was confusion regarding who was responsible for assisting under-performing schools with turnaround strategies. This was attributed to the fact that under-performing schools were frequently visited by different departmental officials,

even though they understood that such issues were to be communicated to and handled by their respective circuit managers. This proved that the relationship between the District Officials and principals is ineffective. This could be because of the hierarchical structure of the school district, which seeks to assume the authoritarian leadership approach (Naicker & Mestry, 2016). Authoritarian leadership can hinder the collegial relationship between the District Officials and the principals, causing continual lack of collaboration and tension (Naicker & Mestry, 2016). The irony of authoritarian leadership by the district the principals is that no one wins the battle of under-performance. Instead it exacerbates the frustration both the District Officials and the principals because the principals are distracted from their roles as the instructional leaders, which may lead to failure to reach the targeted Grade 12 pass percentage.

Participants were asked who the stakeholders/departments responsible were for assisting under-performing schools. Mr Masango had this to say:

> *"According to my understanding, under-performing schools become the project of the District director, of course, with the assistance of delegated circuit managers about curriculum coverage, finance, school governance, safety and security and infrastructure."*

This shows that this principal is aware of who is responsible for under-performing secondary schools, but he assumes that since they work closely with the circuit managers, then it must be the result of delegation on the part of the District director. His understanding coincides with the DBE policy that clearly stipulates that it is the duty of the District Officials/director to offer professional support to under-performing secondary schools to achieve excellence (DBE, 2012). Roberts (2013) affirms that one of the primary roles of the district is to intervene in under-performing secondary schools by offering administrative and professional services to schools and teachers.

Though literature and policy clearly state which stakeholder is responsible for assisting an under-performing secondary school, there is some confusion on the part of the principals.

Some are bombarded by a lot of visits and invitations from different departments within the education sector. This creates confusion as to whom they are answerable. Mr Fangano lamented by saying:

> *"Once you have been classified as an under-performing school everybody from any department within the education sector thinks they have a right to get a slice out of you. Everybody calls you to attend a meeting, and if you don't comply they start to say 'Ah, that's why your school is under-performing.' Even the District director says you must do as you are told and attend every meeting because you are a principal of an under-performing school, or sometimes they even refer to you as an underperformer."*

This response indicated that the principal was frustrated and confused about who was responsible for them as an under-performing school. It is not clear what happens in the meetings they are called into. The principal did mention that at times some of the meetings are not relevant for assisting them to turn their school around, but because they are under-performing schools they must comply. Mr Kgosinkwe commented:

> *"I am not sure if there is a single person or department responsible for assisting us because we get called and visited by most departmental officials, and when they visit they don't assist us, but they usually ask for certain documents like files, policies and things like that."*

According to the DBE 2012), it is the responsibility of the District director to work collaboratively with principals and educators in schools with the vital assistance of circuit managers. It must be noted that what may be causing some confusion is what happens in schools within the same district. For example, Mr Ndaba was clear on who was responsible, but pointed out that they work closely with the circuit managers. The other two participants were uncertain about what was happening in their school. MrNdaba said:

"Once you are termed a T65 school, you become the responsibility of the District director. However, the District director works with circuit managers and subject advisers, or his own management team. The school is the responsibility of the District director because he is held accountable by the province if Grade 12 results in his district are poor."

The uncertainty of principals regarding the question of who is responsible for under-performing schools paints a picture of fragmented and uncoordinated top-down communication. The line of communication for under-performing schools should be clear, and they should know exactly who is responsible for them to eliminate confusion. For any transformation to occur in South African schools, the linkage between the district and the school is of vital importance (Dally &Finnigan, 2011). This transformation can be viewed through the lens of system-wide change, which acknowledges that a school's transformation needs to occur on initiatives from the national and provincial departments, the district and the school, all as agents of change (Chrispeels, Burke, Johnson & Daly, 2008). It is fundamental to understand that schools do not exist in isolation. The system-wide model is fore grounded on ensuring that all schools within a system outgrow change through collaborative means of communicating, connecting and aligning their efforts, which may result in a systemic effect (Harris, 2010). This means that when District Officials are dealing with principals as heads of schools, they need to have a transparent communication to ensure that there is no confusion. Principals of under-performing schools need to feel that they are part of a team that is working towards effecting change in their schools, change that will be made possible by clear communication lines between the district and the schools as part of a much wider system.

4.3.3 Principals lived experiences of the support received from District Officials

The participants in the study were asked: what is the district's role in supporting under-performing schools? What emerged from their responses was that their interpretation of what the district does is putting pressure on them as principals. The pressure that they alluded to was based on demanding improved Grade 12 results. The researcher's interpretation of their experiences was that they were drowning in the pressure-waves of under-performance. This was

because s the participants understood that the district role is to support their schools in curriculum delivery, management, shortage of educational resources and professional development, among other things. However, this is not the kind of support that their schools receive from the district officials.

The participants' understanding of the district role is corroborated by literature. According to the DBE (2013), the district's role is to offer continuous support to under-performing schools through collaborating with principals and educators to achieve excellence. Continuous support in the form of curriculum delivery is one of the core purposes of District Officials (Roberts, 2012). District Officials are to provide educational resources and professional support to foster school effectiveness and efficiency (Narsee, 2006;Diko, 2011). If this is the role of district officials, then why over two decades into democracy is there an alarming increase in the number of underperforming schools in South Africa? As stated in the brief problem statement, insufficient support is the root of the problem that gave birth to this research project.

An investigation conducted by Spaull (2013) found that in cross-national assessments of educational achievement between 1994 and 2011, South Africa performed worse than other low-income African countries. According to Spaull, many South African pupils were unable to read, write and calculate at grade-appropriate levels. These low levels of learner achievement in schools may be linked to poor management and leadership (Van der Voort& Wood, 2016). The researcher's contention is that poor management and leadership emanate from the district and filter down to schools. Schools do not exist in isolation, but as part of a system which consists of the national, provincial, district and circuit offices. The whole education system is designed to assist the schools in ensuring that their core function (improving the educational achievements of all learners) is delivered (DBE, 2013).

One of the highlighted challenges that the principals pointed towards was that there are not enough visits to their schools by the district officials. If these visits do occur, they are on a routine basis, and not much interaction happens between the principals and the District Officials. This routine includes the delivery of circulars as communication from the provincial office. Such routines have degraded the position of the district officials to that of delivery boys. The content of such circulars is rarely discussed, and principals need to do as instructed. In some cases, where district officials make curriculum-based school visits, they do not come with any formal

assessment tools in place. Drowning from the pressure-waves of under-performance creates a situation where principals cannot question any wrongdoing by the District Officials as they are made to feel like sinners that need to follow instructions.

The documents that were reviewed corroborated the claim that not much is done by the District Officials to support under-performing schools. Documents such as school visit reports with minutes clearly showing continuous engagements between the District Officials and the principals were not available. The lack of such a valuable paper trail clearly shows that District Officials are not doing what they are supposed to do, or they are doing less than what is expected of them as policy requires. When the participants were asked what the District Official's role was in supporting their schools, this was how they responded:

Mr Mbhense expressed the following view:

> "*I have experienced the district's role in supporting my school through never-ending meetings that I am often called to during school hours. The first meeting that I had to attend was based on revealing the schools that had underperformed in 2018. After that revelation, ish! Then comes the whip and lashing out at all the principals. The constant blame goes towards the principals as not being able to manage their schools. Ey! It is an embarrassing situation."*

Similarly, Mr Masango shared his experience:

> *"When I first attended the under-performing schools' meetings, my heart sank. My heart sank because I thought there was going to be room for finding out our challenges in our contexts, for trying to find out the solution to the problem of under-performance. Instead we were reprimanded like children."*

What emerged from the findings was that there is nothing meaningful that the principals receive from the meetings with the district officials. To them, attending a meeting for under-performing schools is like going to an arena of shaming, blaming, ridiculing and constant pressure. This happens without being given proper tools to deal with their challenges. The constant pressure through the blaming and shaming perpetuates the drowning in the sea of under-performance. Mr

Fangano clearly painted the picture of the level of frustration he as a principal is going through. This concurs with what Chinsamy (2012) states, that blame and shame become the only intervention districts extend to underperforming schools. Mr Fangano asserted:

> *"I can't wait for a time when I will be out of this bracket of under-performing school because no one cares about what could be the reason for your school performing poorly. … All they tell us is if school 'A' in the same district can achieve such and such results, then why can't you? No one cares about the school's context and environment. …We as principals are forever ridiculed, and we are made to feel like such failures because we can't produce the required results…. If nothing changes in my school then I might as well retire."*

Mr Kgosinkwe commented:

> *"The very first thing that was required of me as the school principal was to submit a turnaround strategy for 2019. I had not started teaching the Grade 12 class for 2019, and already there I was talking about extra classes, afternoon classes….Look, ma'am, when you are asked to submit these turnaround strategies, we just come together as the school management team (SMT) and put in everything that will make the District director happy. The emphasis from what I have seen is that they just need you to submit; as long as the paper is there, then you are off the hook for a little while, before they ask for something else."*

He added:

> *"Ma'am, I don't recall a time when I was asked to narrate the challenges that I have in my school, or had a good reception when we needed support. The district does whatever they like about us, and we just know that we need to produce good results. Any principal of an underperforming school just wants to get out of this bracket to breathe and be free from constant pointing of fingers."*

All four principals, except for Mr Ndaba, were very forthcoming about the level of frustration they endure from the district officials. Here ported:

"I have noticed some assistance from mathematics and physical science subject advisers where teachers are going for workshops. Also, there have been some workshops for newly appointed school-based managers, and that has assisted us a great deal."

For a school to improve the educational achievements of all learners it is vital for all stakeholders to be involved. Stakeholders such as the district need to fully support any interventions towards the improvement of results. Support by the District Officials is essential for capacity-building at school level (Bantwini& King-Mackenzie, 2011). Capacity building is essential because schools cannot redesign themselves. District Officials should play a role in creating conditions for long-term progress in a school (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). This means that for a school to be successful it requires the effort of everyone involved.

The question that arose for the researcher from how the participants expressed their views was: what could be hindering the District Officials from supporting their schools? A study by Taylor and Prinsloo (2015) found that District Officials were unsure of their roles, and they were not in possession of the authority required to fulfill their functions. Another hindrance is the lack of resources that often handicaps the intention of the District Officials (Taylor & Prinsloo, 2015). Bantwini and Diko (2011) also emphasise the shortage of human capacity that prevents the few district officials from servicing the schools effectively. This means that some of the district officials lack a deep understanding of the mandates that they must deliver to schools.

What is emerging from the findings thus far is that both the District Officials and the principals are overwhelmed by the pressures of underperformance. On the one hand the principals are pressured to design strategies to improve Grade 12 results with inadequate or no support from the District Officials. On the other hand, the District Officials are to capacitate

the principals when they themselves are incapable of effectively servicing schools. It is thus not surprising that education in South Africa is in crisis.

From the instructional leadership perspective, District Officials should support the principals in schools in achieving a clear focus on instruction. Capacity-building can be through class visits and giving feedback to teachers so that they grow in their practice. However, when principals are not professionally developed to carry out their instructional leadership practices in schools

The findings also suggest that the frustrations and pressure are due to District Officials not being able to work as a team with school principals. There is no clear communication on why the principals need to submit turnaround strategies. Turnaround strategies should be based on the specific needs of a school, and these plans should be handed to the District director for intervention (MacMaster, 2015). This means that when the District plans its own turnaround strategies, these should be in line with the needs of the school. Recommendations in this regard will be provided in Chapter Five.

4.3.4 Challenges experienced by principals of under-performing schools when receiving support from District Officials.

It is without a doubt that the quality of teachers' instruction is related to learners' achievement. For teachers' instruction to be effective, it is important to enhance it through school- based professional development initiatives such as PLCs (Warwas & Helm, 2018). PLCs are assumed by various scholars (Dufour, 2004; Desimone, 2009; Chapman & Munjis, 2014; Van Blaere & Devos, 2016; Warwas & Helm, 2018) to improve the quality of teachers through sharing their expertise towards improved learner results. Teachers in PLCs collaborate through sharing classroom practices and experiences to combat the challenges of teachers working in isolation. Such collaborative measures through PLCs may result in teachers possessing the right tools towards effective teaching that positively affect learners' learning (Steyn, 2016).

Professional development in some districts has been reported to be occurring infrequently, superficially and somewhat detached from teachers' practice (Olsen, 2014). For professional development to be effective it needs to be site- and practice-based; it needs to be collective and not an individualistic act, and it must be ongoing, with a sustained focus (Dufour, 2014). Professional development must be job-embedded, with teachers actively engaging in learning in their daily work, and outcomes-based, i,e, directly linked to improving learner results (Dufour, 2014).

In this section, participants were asked; how does the district support under-performing schools? What emerged from the data generated was that there seems to be constant abuse of resources in the name of professional development. Mr Kgosinkwe commented:

> *"When we fell into the bracket of underperforming schools, I expected that my teachers would receive adequate support from the subject advisers on issues pertaining to the unpacking of subjects. However, that hasn't been the case … some subject advisers that I call for help tell me that they have about 70 schools to service … sometimes you'll find that one subject adviser has double-parked, meaning they are advising for two subjects, sometimes subjects that they themselves have never taught,"*

He added:

"Well, there have been interventions like the introduction of the lead educators, and twinning with other schools that produce good results. The lead educators teach our children during weekends and school holidays. They come from well-performing schools, and they themselves have a track record of a good pass percentage in their respective subjects"

What Mr Kgosinkwe narrated was corroborated by other principals. This is how they expressed their view on how they receive support from the district:

Mr Masango:

> *"When a school underperforms, the first person to be blamed is the principal….so we (I and other underperforming principals) were once taken to*

these 'former Model C' schools that had good results at the time. ... Hmm! When we got there, I expected that we would sit down and share our challenges in our school, and possibly have suggestions towards solving them. ... Instead, we were just made to observe, and the district officials called that twinning with these schools to learn. Let me tell you, ma'am, that was time wasted because you can never compare a township school with a former Model C school that has all the facilities and resources that I don't have in my school. The contexts are just not the same."

MrNdaba:

"The district officials have supported the T65 schools through radical intervention programmes. In these programmes, the Department employs lead educators who work closely with the subject advisers for monitoring purposes. The lead educators are to help the teachers at school, working together with them in identifying the challenges that learners have. All these lead educators are paid for by the Department. The material, like the study guides, is also provided by the Department, and all the handouts detailing information that our learners need; the Department pays for that. Not only that, children and educators are provided with meals, and the service providers for catering are again paid for by the Department. Moreover, the principals of T65 schools are to attend workshops on different strategies of how to improve the results. I think that is adequate support given to us by the Department."

What is emerging from the findings is that there is constant abuse of state financial resources in the name of professional development. The abuse comes in the form of the duplication of work that is paid for by the DBE. Lead teachers are teachers from other schools that are employed by the DBE, but they are paid extra to teach learners in underperforming schools. In the underperforming school there is now a teacher who is redundant but paid a salary by the DBE. All the public schools are provided with textbooks paid for by the DBE, but during the

radical intervention programmes there are study guides and handouts issued, which again are paid for by the DBE. Some of these underperforming schools have their daily nutrition rollout that is provided and paid for by the DBE. At the same time during the radical intervention programmes, there are other service providers offering catering to the learners, which is paid for by the DBE.

Professional development should be continuous and site-based, with teachers coming together to share their expertise for the betterment of student results (Dufour, 2014). Professional development should not be based on some teachers doing the job for other teachers, as that might not yield good results. It appears that the district officials are quick to come with intervention programmes in blanket form, having not done their homework. Mr Mbhense expressed his dissatisfaction on the issue of lead educators:

> *"Before I became a principal, I was a lead educator for physical sciences, because in the school where I was previously employed, I used to get a 100% pass in my subject. Then I got promoted to be a principal in this school. Now, just because my school has underperformed, that has automatically made me an underperformer. Now another teacher whom I have mentored has to come to my school and teach my learners, because the assumption is that I am inefficient in delivering the subject matter."*

Mr Fangano also highlighted other contributing factors that the district officials shy away from in their pursuit of their radical intervention programmes. He commented:

> *"The barometer used to introduce these lead educators in our schools is only the results, leaving out other factors contributing to poor results like poor subject choices and narrow curricula in our rural schools. There is no proper diagnosis of the cause so that interventions maybe properly aligned to challenges of the school."*

He added:

> *"You see, ma'am, the irony of this lead educator situation is that some of these lead educators are not better than us, they are just lucky that they are in different contexts where they are able to produce good results."*

According to the policy, district officials are to support and work in collaboration with the principals to achieve excellence in schools (DBE, 2013). However, there is a clear gap between what is intended by the policy and what eventually happens at the implementation stage. One of the principals highlighted that when the district officials were putting more emphasis on the use of PLCs, he felt that that was working because teachers were more confident in delivering their curriculum.

> *"There was a time when the Department introduced this concept of PLCs. Ey! I thought that was working for us as principals and for teachers as well. … Ai! Suddenly it stopped, then they started this lead educator concept, which I don't find working."*

PLCs are about teachers working together in creating a culture of learning as professionals towards ensuring that learners' learning is improved (Dufour, 2014). It is learning that occurs continuously with a clear emphasis on collective knowledge, using a cohesive group of teachers to ultimately promote the achievements of learners (Dufour, 2014; McLaughlin & Talbert, 2015). PLCs as part of professional development are not about one teacher overpowering other teachers. Lead educator intervention may be detrimental to other teachers in that it takes away their power and learners' respect, and a teacher may lose the morale to go on. This in the end may further perpetuate the challenges that underperforming schools already have.

For any professional development to be effective there must be monitoring and evaluation in place to gauge if the teachers and principals are capacitated, and if there is change in a positive direction taking place. The researcher's view is that there is no professional development happening. Instead, there is an assumption that teachers in the under-performing schools are inefficient, and therefore they need saving by the lead educators. This assumption creates a

situation where all the schools are given the same pill to cure an illness with different root causes. The assumption from the District Officials is that the schools are under-performing because teachers cannot teach, and so the abuse of financial resources continues. The big question is, is it about radical intervention programmes, or is it tender-oriented? Who is benefiting from all the duplication of work?

4.3.5 The benchmark used to measure the effectiveness of support/intervention programmes

In this section participants were asked: "What benchmark is used to measure the effectiveness of the intervention programmes?" What emerged from the findings is that not much emphasis is put on ensuring that teaching and learning are understood to be an ongoing process in schools. The focus on the part of the district officials is only on the overall results of Grade 12. Not much is said about the quality of the results; the focus is on whether a school has obtained above or below the 60% benchmark. Mr Mbhense commented:

> *"The confusing part about these intervention programmes is that there is not much monitoring done in our schools to check if the interventions are helping. The only monitoring done is to check if the children do attend these extra classes provided by the lead educators."*

Mr Fangano had this to say:

> *"Ma'am, you must understand one thing: every principal within the bracket of underperforming school has one thing in mind, and that is to get out of this bracket, for us to get off the hook. If it means that learners do more subjects that are easy to pass, then we do that so that we can have a higher percentage."*

These comments made the researcher wonder if the post-Grade 12 interests of the learners is taken into consideration, or is the business just about effecting a pass. Mr Masango shared his experience:

"You know, ma'am, I'm looking at the physical sciences results of our Grade 12 and I'm asking myself, maybe these learners are bewitched. We have a lead educator who comes here every Saturday, but still no change is happening, but when we fail the lashing is going to come back to us regardless of having someone introduced to us by the district."

He added:

"Sometimes we even think if the percentage for school-based assessment can be bigger, then maybe we can have a chance at passing these children."

The researcher's view from what the participants have mentioned is that there is a tug-of-war between quality and quantity in the expectation of results. Mr Ndaba, for instance, mentioned that in his school, yes, he has underperformed, but the best students in the province come from his school. He had this to say:

"My school has produced more distinctions than the schools that obtain 100% pass percentage. I have an enrollment of about 380 to 400 Grade 12 each year, and of the learners that pass, most of them obtain a bachelor's pass. ... Some schools that do well in overall results, you'll find that the learners obtain mostly certificate passes, but they are praised by the Department."

In other words, a low percentage pass does not necessarily mean bad results, and a high percentage pass does not necessarily mean good results. Mr Mbhense had this to share when it came to the quality and quantity of results.

"What is surprising is that they don't even look at the quality of results that you are producing as a school. This is because a school can produce 45% with 90% bachelors and other schools can get 100%, only to find that it's higher certificate."

It seems as if the focus of the District Officials is the overall level of Grade 12 results. The content of the results and what the results will mean for the child after Grade 12 do not seem a concern for District Officials. The quality of results in schools is dependent on effective district leadership with a clear focus on collaborating with schools towards effective instructional practices (Bantwini, 2015). These instructional practices are also enhanced by the provision of professional development opportunities for teachers and provision for leadership succession (Leithwood, 2010). The lack of support for professional development and effective instructional practices has caused a situation where principals and teachers are now channeling learners to choose subjects that are considered easy to pass. They do this so that the pass percentage can increase and then the surveillance of their schools will ease off. It is a sad situation because it means learners are not career-guided properly as they should be. The focus now is the pass percentage which equates to the quantity of results rather than the quality of results.

Mr Fangano had this to say:

> *"Our focus as a school is to obtain above 65%....so, we have few learners doing core mathematics and physical sciences because they are the failing subjects. Then we increase the number of learners doing dramatic arts, history and tourism.....Maybe we are going to do better this year and have a chance to breathe."*

Mr Ndaba:

> *"Much as the school specialises in technical subjects, I have introduced other subjects that are going to boost the number of learners passing Grade 12, which will then increase our Grade 12 pass percentage."*

Mr Kgosinkwe offered this view:

> *"Over the past two years I have noticed an improvement in our results. Yes, we are still an underperforming school, but there is improvement because of the subject that our learners are doing."*

These comments are an indication that the issue about results does not seem to care about what will become of learners after Grade 12. The pressure and frustration that is endured by the principals of under-performing schools has pushed them to want to do any means possible for the learners to pass. The quality of the pass is not included in their turn around strategic plans. The unanswered question continues to hover: is it about quality results or quantity results.

4. 3. 6 Chapter Summary

This chapter's brief problem statement stated that what is dictated by policy is not happening in the implementation stage. Policy states that district officials are to work collaboratively with principals and educators of schools, to give management and professional support, and help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching (DBE, 2013). The findings in this chapter clearly show that support towards the schools is not happening. What seem to be happening is that principals do wish to have conversations with the district officials around the challenges in their contexts: but to no effect. Professional development that is framed by clear instructional leadership practices for the principals is of vital importance, but that is also lacking. According to Bantwini and Diko (2016), highly supportive districts have been known to promote school leaders' confidence in their ability to succeed. This means that if school leaders are supported effectively, no one will be prey to the pressure of under-performance. Not if the culture of collaboration and distributed leadership prevails. Most importantly, no one would suffer if the district officials understood that schools are a part of a system and they do not exist in isolation.

This chapter has presented the findings under five themes: the benchmark used by the district/DBE to identify under-performing schools; the stakeholder responsible for assisting schools that have been classified as underperforming schools; succumbing the pressure of under-performance; the continual abuse of resources in the façade for professional development; finally, is the grade 12 pass rate about quality or quantity?

The following chapter, provides the summary, conclusions and recommendations of the study.

CHAPTER FIVE

SUMMARY OF THE STUDY AND CONCLUSIONS

5.1 Introduction

This study aimed at exploring the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools through the perspective of principals. This supportive role of District Officials was explored through the understanding and experiences of five principals of under-performing schools in Umlazi District. This research study is fore-grounded on the idea that District Officials have the prominent task of supporting schools through working collaboratively with principals and educators in ensuring that teaching and learning is effective. This idea is supported by both literature and South African Policy that for schools to achieve excellence, Districts Officials need to assist schools through working collaboratively (DBE, 2013). Bridging the gap between Districts and school principals to improve leadership and management skills could accelerate the journey towards excellence in teaching and learning (DBE, 2013). Chapter five of this research study comprises of the research journey summary. The themes that emerged in chapter four are also presented using a theoretical framework and literature that was employed in this study. Furthermore, this chapter also presents some lessons learnt from the research process. In conclusion, this chapter outlines observations in the research journey.

The research questions of this study were:

1. What do principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

2. How do principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools?

5.2 The Research Journey

Chapter One presented an overview of what the study discusses, and the context of enquiry in which the study was conducted. This included the background and rationale; research problem and purpose of the study. Key objectives and definitions of key concepts that were prominent throughout the study were also provided in chapter one. What was discovered from chapter one was that, South Africa has phenomenal education policies. One of these policies highlights the

importance of District Officials to work collaboratively with Principals to support schools towards achieving excellence in teaching and learning (DBE, 2011). Support by the District Officials is significant in ensuring effective assessment; quality teaching and learning; increased learner performance and achievement (Roberts, 2011). Some scholars have argued that Districts are incapable of stimulating and sustaining meaningful initiatives towards teaching and learning because of their political and bureaucratic character (Honig, 2010; Marsh, 2011; Robinson & Buntrock, 2011; Duke, 2016). Policy and literature corroborates the importance of support to schools for improved results. However, what emerged from the background is that there seems to be a gap in the implementation of support. What seems to be happening in the implementation stage is not what is intended by policy. This gap in the implementation of support to schools motivated the exploration of the District Officials' role to support under-performing schools and the experiences in receiving the support. This exploration was viewed from the lens of principals of under-performing secondary schools.

Chapter Two provided an in-depth review of related literature which scaffolded the debates around the role of the district support to under-performing schools. This chapter also provided the theoretical framework that gave insight on instructional leadership theory that framed this study. Chapter two started by conceptualising educational leadership and management. In this chapter, I presented local and international literature that has been conducted on District Officials and their role as resources towards supporting quality teaching and learning in schools. This chapter gave an insight to different types of leadership that could be adopted by school leaders. There are various issues on District Officials support to schools that surfaced from literature. Highly supportive District Officials have been proven to be instilling confidence in principals' ability to succeed in their schools (Bottoms & Schmidt-Davis, 2010; Leithwood, 2010; Honig, 2012). District Officials that can instill confidence in school principals are those that offer support through having a clear vision and framework in which principals can work from (Bottoms & Schimdt-Davis, 2010). This means that, though District Officials support schools, but principals need to have their own development plan based on the boundaries prescribed by the District. What was also highlighted in this chapter was the issue of professional development not only on teaching and learning but on leadership and management for principals (Honig,

2013). This is because most school leaders begin their professional careers as teachers, armed with just a teacher's qualification (Moorosi, 2011). Moorosi and Bantwini (2016) also emphasizes the importance of collaboration between District officials and Principals. This is because principals are the custodians of their school's vision, mission and values (Mathibe, 2007). This means that principals are in the best position to know what can or cannot work for their schools on issues of intervention programmes for improved results (Mathibe, 2007). What emerged as a concern from literature was that Districts have been found to be bureaucratic and unsupportive to schools (Moorosi & Bantwini, 2016). The unresponsiveness towards schools could be because of the effects of a top-down system that dominates in the Basic Education Department. Bantwini and Diko (2011) also highlighted that some District Officials are unable to provide support to their schools because of many schools that they need to cater for. Chapter two presents the importance of District Officials as instructional leaders to better equip school leaders and teachers for transforming their schools through the attainment of improved results.

Chapter Three delved into the research methods employed in this study. These methods were for the generation and analysis of data. Trustworthiness and ethical issues were also discussed. This chapter discussed the research design and methodology of the study. The study used the interpretive paradigm to uncover the principal's understanding of the District Officials' support to under-performing schools and understand how principals experienced receiving this support. A case study was used to capture the principal's experiences and to have a clear understanding of the phenomenon. The method of generating data from the participants was through semi-structured interviews which allowed me to observe how participants expressed themselves. The themes that emerged during the process of generating data were discussed in chapter four.

Chapter Four mainly focused on presenting the findings, analysis and discussion of generated data through themes, these findings are discussed as such:

The findings draw attention to some issues around support received by principals of under-performing schools. The first finding that emerged from the data generation process was that principals have a clear understanding of the role of District Officials in supporting under-

performing schools. Principals of under-performing schools understand and expect to be supported by the District Officials in turning around their schools towards improved results. Among other things that were highlighted as their expectations by principals were support through frequent visits from the District Officials, the availability of effective professional development and the culture of shared vision. Their understanding and expectations of the role of the District officials is what is stipulated in educational policy on the roles and responsibilities of District Officials.

The second finding that emerged from data generation is that what the principals of under-performing schools expect the District Officials to tender to their schools is not adequately provided. The expected relationship of collaborative planning between District Officials and principals of under-performing schools seem not to be happening in practice. Though the expectations are not met but there are some interventions that are offered by the District Officials in the quest to support teaching and learning to these schools. Principals shared their experiences that some of these intervention programmes offered by the District Officials are in a blanket form and they find them not suited for their own schools. What emerged from the findings is that principals welcome the support that is offered, however, they would like to have a voice on how this support can be offered to their schools.

Another critical finding that emerged from the study is that, there seem to be challenges that obstruct some District Officials from adequately providing support as expected. One of the challenges was the issue of limited District Officials that specifically offer curriculum support such as Subject Advisors. Principals shared that some of their teachers have never seen their Subject Advisors due to the many schools that they need to cater for. Some Subject Advisors cater for more than one subject which makes it challenging for them to assist teachers with comprehending the subject policies.

Findings show that there is a need for support in the absence of pressure and intimidation. Support is provided for, but not to the expectations of principals of under-performing schools. Data generated showed that there is a need to bridge the gap that exists between the District Officials and schools to foster more collaborative relationships amongst the two structures.

5.3 Discussion of findings and key learnings

Chapter Five delves into the discussion of findings and the key learnings that surfaced from the journey of this research study. These discussions are presented as such: The principals' understanding, expectations and Policy; Lived experiences of Principals in receiving support and finally, support programmes towards under-performing schools.

5.3.1 Principal's understanding, expectations and policy

The first research question aimed at uncovering what principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools. The findings that emerged were that principals do understand the role of District Officials towards supporting under-performing schools. Principals were very clear on their expectations from the District Officials, their expectations are also stipulated in policy that: "District Officials are 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 help schools achieve excellence in learning and teaching" (DBE, 2013, p.16).

Professional support towards the development of new curriculum reforms, monitoring of the implementation of these policies and providing continuous based support is very critical for under-performing schools (Bantwini & Diko, 2011). The participants expressed that their expectations on the support is partially met because the workshops that are offered are not enough to fully empower educational practitioners to impart knowledge to their learners. This situation slows down progress in schools, causing major damage to the learners in a long-run.

Another finding that emerged from the data generation was the lack of teamwork between the District Officials and schools. Team work is essential for practices such as aligning curriculum, classroom practices and professional development (Haslam, 2014). This practice could in a long raise the student performance and in the long run turn around under-performing schools. The general agreement from the participants is the knowledge and understanding of the supportive role of the District Officials. Though there is support offered to under-performing schools, but it is not to their satisfaction as it does not meet the participant's expectations.

5.3.2 Lived experiences of principals in receiving support

Having uncovered what principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools, I needed to find out how the principals were receiving this support. What emerged from the findings was the culture of fear that has developed in the process of receiving support through constant principals' meetings where principals are reprimanded for their under-performance. Principals expressed that being a principal of an under-performing schools means that you have failed as a leader and cannot have a voice. According to Moorosi and Bantwini (2016) school leaders should be recognised and included to mold the mechanism for collaboration between District Officials and principals. The collaboration should be based on providing instructional support (as mandated by the policy) not on reprimanding, blaming and shaming as it was expressed.

Another finding that emerged was how under-performing schools were receiving support through the intervention programmes for Grade 12 results. Some of the intervention programmes from the District Officials were the introduction of lead educators, twining with other schools that produce good results. Lead educators work closely with subject advisors for monitoring purposes. Their task is to assist teachers at school, working together with teachers to identify the challenges that learners have. The resources such as study guides, handouts and food are provided for by the Department of Basic Education.

Much as there is dissatisfaction on the intervention programmes but what was interesting for me was that support is provided for the schools. What seems to be the reason for dissatisfaction is that this support is not because of collaborative planning between the District Officials and principals of under-performing schools.

5.4 Key learnings and Concluding remarks

Significant findings of this study call for an emphasis on collaborative planning between the District Officials and principals of under-performing schools. What emerged from the findings was that under-performing schools do receive support though it does not meet their satisfaction. The significant gap in communication between the district and the schools creates a situation where there is no shared vision and collaboration for turning around the under-performance in schools. According to Peters, Carr and Doldan (2018), the leadership roles between the district

and the principals should be framed by shared governance, time for collaboration and democratic practices. This is corroborated by Kennedy Deuel, Nelson and Slavit et al. (2011), who state that that collaboration and shared governance are essential in solidifying the collective efforts of the principals and districts towards attaining academic improvement. Communication for collaborative effort enhances learner performance and improves results.

The findings of this study present that while principals of under-performing schools understand the supportive role of the District Officials as very critical in turning around their schools. It is recommended that the district work in collaboration with school principals to unearth the challenges that their schools go through that may have led to under-performance. Unearthing the challenges will ensure that the turnaround strategies for improving results are unique to each school. Collaborative work between the principals and the district officials means that the district officials will work towards ensuring that they support the principals to be effective instructional leaders. Collaborative work will also ensure that educator's teaching and learning skills are improved, thus improving student achievement.

The findings also recommend that there needs to be constant school visits dedicated to assisting teachers towards their curriculum delivery. This can be done through class visits, proper monitoring and, most importantly, giving feedback to ensure teacher development. District officials could focus more on facilitating the use of PLCs in schools to ensure a clear focus on learning for the teachers and improving their student achievements.

It is also recommended that there is continuous professional development for both the principals as instructional leaders and educators in shaping their curriculum delivery. What emerged from the findings was that there was limited professional development happening in supporting under-performing schools. District officials could facilitate regular workshops for principals and teachers, and these should be followed by a monitoring process to evaluate whether the workshops have been successful. District officials could work more on the content of these workshops so that they do not become mere information-giving events that have no effect towards meeting the needs of the schools

The findings of this study may add to the limited body of knowledge that exists in the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools.

5.5 Chapter summary

This chapter provided a summary the research journey; it discussed key findings that emerged; finally, it also provided key learning and concluding remarks with recommendations.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A-Interview Schedule

Research Questions

1.What do principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing secondary schools?

2. How do principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing secondary schools.

INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

THE EXPERIENCES OF SUPPORT IN AN UNDER-PERFORMING SCHOOL.

a. Tell me about how your school fell into the bracket of under-performing schools.
b. What is structure within the DBE that is responsible for under-performing schools?
c. What is your understanding of the role of District Officials to schools like yours?
d. What are your expectations of support from the District Officials to under-performing schools?
e. Do your feel that these expectations are met? Please elaborate.
f. What is the support that is given to under-performing schools?
g. Do you feel that this support can turn-around your school? Please elaborate.
h. How is this support given to under-performing school?
i. How have you experienced this support given to you and your school?
j. Before summing up, what more would you like to share that will help me advance my study.

APPENDIX B

UNIVERSITY OF KWAZULU-NATAL
INYUVESI YAKWAZULU-NATALI

31 October 2019

Mrs Zenhlanhla Zenneth Cibane (204516144)
School of Education
Edgewood Campus

Dear Mrs Cibane,

Protocol reference number: HSS/0580/019M
Project title: District officials support to under-performing schools: Perspectives of school principals of Umlazi district

Approval Notification – Expedited Application

This letter serves to notify you that your application received in June 2019 in connection with the above, was reviewed by the Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee (HSSREC) and the protocol has been granted **FULL APPROVAL**

Any alteration/s to the approved research protocol i.e. Questionnaire/Interview Schedule, Informed Consent Form, Title of the Project, Location of the Study, Research Approach and Methods must be reviewed and approved through the amendment/modification prior to its implementation. In case you have further queries, please quote the above reference number. PLEASE NOTE: Research data should be securely stored in the discipline/department for a period of 5 years.

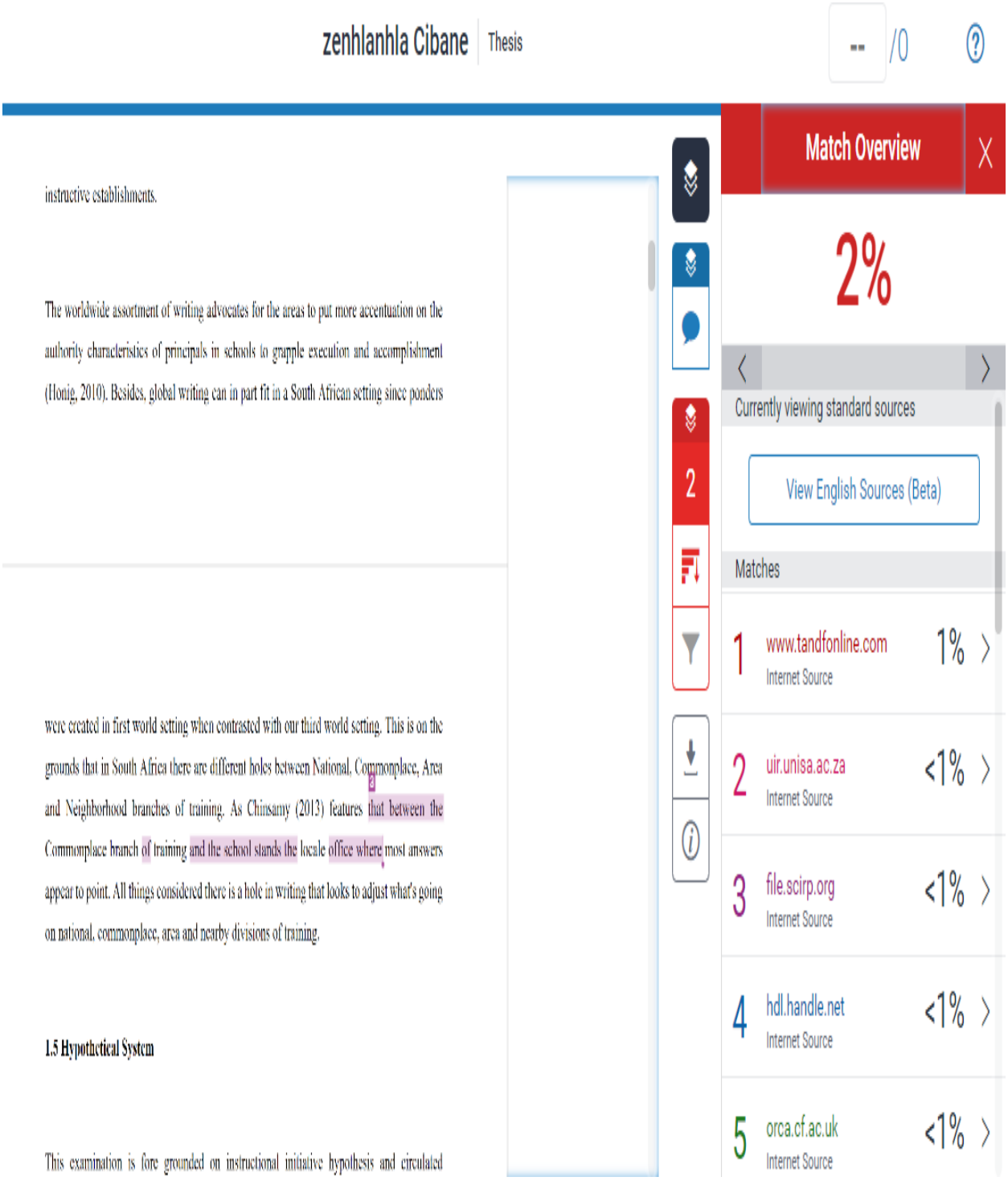
This approval is valid for one year from 31 October 2019.
To ensure uninterrupted approval of this study beyond the approval expiry date, a progress report must be submitted to the Research Office on the appropriate form 2 - 3 months before the expiry date. A close-out report to be submitted when study is finished.

Yours sincerely,

Professor Urmilla Bob
University Dean of Research

/ms

APPENDIX C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instructive establishments.
The worldwide assortment of writing advocates for the areas to put more accentuation on the authority characteristics of principals in schools to grapple execution and accomplishment (Honig, 2010). Besides, global writing can in part fit in a South African setting since ponders
were created in first world setting when contrasted with our third world setting. This is on the grounds that in South Africa there are different holes between National, Commonplace, Area and Neighborhood branches of training. As Chinsamy (2013) features that between the Commonplace branch of training and the school stands the locale office where most answers appear to point. All things considered there is a hole in writing that looks to adjust what's going on national, commonplace, area and nearby divisions of training.
1.5 Hypothetical System
This examination is fore grounded on instructional initiative hypothesis and circulated

APPENDIX D: Letter requesting permission from principals

60023 A, Adams Mission

The Principal
Sobonakhona High School

Dear Sir/Madam

REQUEST FOR PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH AT YOUR SCHOOL

I am Zenhlanhla Z. Cibane and I am conducting a research as a requirement of the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards a Degree of Master of Education. The title of the research study is "The role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools: Perspectives of school principals".

I would like to use your school as one of the research sites, and this letter intends to request your permission to conduct research in your school. The focus of the study is on uncovering what principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools therefore I would like to request you (the principal). Should permission be granted, the interviews with the principal will be scheduled for dates and times that are convenient to *him or her*. Care will be taken that no disruption is caused during such interviews. Please also note that the participation in this study is voluntary, and the participant has the right to withdraw from the study at any time without any negative consequence. In addition, you are assured that details of the school and the participant will be kept confidential, and your identity will never be disclosed to anyone.

For more information and questions about the study, you may contact the researcher or the research supervisor on the following details:

Name of researcher Cell No. 072 324 1099 email: zennethc2017@gmail.com
Supervisor: Dr. BNCK Mkhize: Tel No.: (031) 260 1870; Email: mkhizeb3@ukzn.ac.za

You may also contact the Research Office through:
P. Mohun
HSSREC Research Office,
Tel.: 031 260 4557 E-mail: mohunp@ukzn.ac.za
Thanking you in advance.

Yours in Education

Mrs Z.Z. Cibane

Consent Form

School letterhead

Date

Dear Mrs Cibane

PERMISSION TO CONDUCT RESEARCH

Your letter titled “Request to conduct research…” has reference. Please be informed that you are granted a permission to conduct your research at the above-mentioned school.

Yours sincerely

School stamp

_____

Name of Principal

APPENDIX E: Request to participants to form part of the sample

60023 A Adams Mission

The Principal

REQUEST FOR PARTICIPATION IN THE RESEARCH

I am Zenhlanhla Zenneth Cibane and I am conducting a research as a requirement at the University of KwaZulu-Natal towards a Degree of Master of Education. The title of the research is "The Role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools: Perspectives of school principals". The objectives of the study are:

- To uncover what principals understand and expect to be the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools.
- To understand how principals experience the role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools.

The study will focus on the perspectives of Principals. This letter intends to elucidate the purpose of the study and to request your participation in the study.

Please note that:

- Your confidentiality is guaranteed as your inputs will not be attributed to you in person, but reported only as a population member opinion.
- The interview may last for about 1 hour and may be split into two parts depending on your preference.
- Any information given by you cannot be used against you, and the collected data will be used for purposes of this research only.
- Data will be stored in secure storage and destroyed after 5 years.
- You have a choice to participate, not participate or stop participating in the research. You will not be penalized for taking such an action.
- Your involvement is purely for academic purposes only, and there are no financial benefits involved.
- If you are willing to be interviewed, please indicate (by ticking as applicable) whether or not you are willing to allow the interview to be recorded by the following equipment:

	Willing	Not willing
Audio equipment		
Photographic equipment		
Video equipment		

I can be contacted at:

Email: zennethc2017@gmail.com

Cell: 072 324 1099

My supervisor is Dr. BNCK Mkhize who is located at the School of Education, at the University of KwaZulu-Natal. He can be contacted at:

Email: Dr. BNCK Mkhize : Tel No.: (031) 260 1870: Email: mkhizeb3@ukzn.ac.za

I hope this letter will find your positive consideration, thanking you in advance.

Yours Sincerely

Mrs Z.Z. Cibane

Consent form

PLEASE COMPLETE THE FOLLOWING SECTION FOR CONSENT OF PARTICIPATION:

I ____ (Full names of participant) hereby confirm that I understand the nature and purpose of the study entitled: The Role of District Officials in supporting under-performing schools: Perspectives of school principals. I agree to participate in the study. I am also fully aware that I have the right to withdraw from the study at any point should I wish to do so, without any negative or undesirable consequence. I am also aware that there are neither any foreseeable direct benefits nor direct risks associated with my participation in this study. I therefore understand the contents of this letter fully and I do **GIVE CONSENT / DO NOT GIVE CONSENT** for the interviews to be digitally recorded.

____________________________ ____________________

Signature Date

School stamp