THE COMMON AND CONTESTED MEANINGS OF EDUCATION DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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A thesis submitted to the Faculty of Education of the University of Pretoria in fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Education

February 2006
DECLARATION

I declare that this dissertation is my own unaided work. It is submitted for the degree of Doctor of Education in the University of Pretoria. It has not been submitted before for any other degree or examination in any other university.

_____________________
Hersheela Narsee

___________ day of February, 2006
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

I shared the onerous, but intellectually inspiring journey towards this dissertation with many of my colleagues, friends and family members. Without the support of those close to me, this thesis would not have been possible.

To my partner, Jits, and my son, Yash, I cannot thank you enough for your tolerance and patience during this period. Thank you, Jits, for the support you gave me, particularly over the weekends.

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South District, who gave up their valuable time to participate in interviews.

Finally, I would like to thank the national and provincial stakeholders who were interviewed for this study, for their insights into questions asked of them during interviews.
SUMMARY

This study inquires how the idea of districts came into being in the South African education system in the absence of official policy. It questions why there is no explicit government policy on education districts, particularly in view of the ubiquity of districts in South African education policy discourse. In doing so, the study elucidates the character of South African local education, and illuminates the niche that districts occupy in the education system. Additionally, by invoking Sutton and Levinson’s (2001:4) thesis that ‘people make policy through practice’, the study brings to light practical meanings assigned to districts by schools, and by national, provincial and district officials.

The study argues that the central dilemma of education districts in South Africa is their structural condition. It concludes that districts operate at the intersection of the dual, related dichotomies of support and pressure, centralisation and decentralisation. Districts persistently endeavour to coalesce the dichotomy of support and pressure in their work with schools; at the same time, they struggle to straddle their role as deconcentrated field units of provincial head offices and as school support centres. The study proposes that only conscious engagement with these dichotomies, as well as active agency on district-school relationships, will districts manage the tensions between the policy, support and management roles expected of them.

The dominant discourse on the role of districts in South Africa places districts as support centres for schools (Mphahlele, 1999; DoE, 2000). While districts post-1994 do not reflect the authoritarian and controlling features of the apartheid era, the study found that policy transmission, policy compliance and ‘policy alleviation’ (a process where district officials attempt to ‘soften’ the rough edges of policy effects on schools), tend to dominate district functions. Even the ‘support’ provided by districts to schools reflects that which is intended by government, rather than that experienced by schools. District agendas are set from the top down rather than the bottom up; hence schools rarely experience district support as a response to their own problems and needs.
In reflecting on the character of districts, the study concludes that there is no system of local education in South Africa since there are no common norms and standards governing it. Local education in South Africa does not function as a single organism but comprises disparate structures that vary considerably in organisational design and nomenclature. Despite these differences though, the all-encompassing concept of ‘districts’ to describe local education in South Africa remains ubiquitous in education discourse. An explanation for the homogenisation of the discourse on local education resides with the observation that as deconcentrated units of provincial education departments, districts reflect a common rationale for their existence, namely to serve as field units of government.

The reasons for the absence of a policy on districts are rooted in constitutional, legal, historical and political influences. The Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), for example, shaped government thinking on local education by concentrating government’s attention on school-level rather than local-level governance. Moreover, interpretations of the Constitution (RSA 1996) by key legal experts suggest that national government cannot develop policy on provincial organisation, as this is a provincial competence. However, the establishment of the district health system created by the National Health Act, 2003, stands in contradiction to this line of reasoning, and reinforces the conclusion of the study – that national education authorities have not established a statutory district education system because there is no South African precedent for it and no political incentive to create it.

Key words
education, districts, decentralisation, school improvement, apartheid education, local education, delegations, school support, education policy, South Africa.
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## ACRONYMS

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<tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>ABET</td>
<td>Adult Basic Education and Training</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ACE</td>
<td>Advanced Certificate in Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>ACS</td>
<td>Agency Coordination Structure</td>
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<tr>
<td>ATKV</td>
<td>Afrikaanse Taal and Kultuur Vereniging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ANC</td>
<td>African National Congress</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BMT</td>
<td>Broad Management Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>CBO</td>
<td>Community-based Organisation</td>
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<tr>
<td>CDS</td>
<td>Curriculum Development and Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CEM</td>
<td>Council of Education MECs</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEO</td>
<td>Chief Executive Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>CEPD</td>
<td>Centre for Education Policy Development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CODESA</td>
<td>Congress for a Democratic South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>CTAs</td>
<td>Continuous Tasks for Assessment</td>
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<tr>
<td>DAS</td>
<td>Development Appraisal System</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DBSA</td>
<td>Development Bank of Southern Africa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DETC</td>
<td>District Education and Training Council</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDP</td>
<td>District Development Programme</td>
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<tr>
<td>DDSP</td>
<td>District Development Support Programme</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DET</td>
<td>Department of Education and Train</td>
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<tr>
<td>DETC</td>
<td>District Education and Training Council</td>
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<td>DoE</td>
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<tr>
<td>DoH</td>
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<td>Department of National Education [pre-1994]</td>
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<td>DPLG</td>
<td>Department of Provincial and Local Government</td>
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<tr>
<td>DPSA</td>
<td>Department of Public Service and Administration</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECD</td>
<td>Early Childhood Development</td>
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<tr>
<td>ECS</td>
<td>Education Co-ordination Services</td>
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EDUPOL  Education Policy and System Change Unit
ELRC  Education Labour Relations Council
EMGD  Education Management and Governance Development
EMIS  Education Management and Information Service
ERS  Education Renewal Strategy
ESS  Education Support Services
FEDSAS  Federation of School Governing Bodies of South Africa
FET  Further Education and Training
FFC  Finance and Fiscal Commission
GDE  Gauteng Department of Education
GET  General Education and Training
GETC  Gauteng Education and Training Council
GPG  Gauteng Provincial Government
GSSC  Gauteng Shared Services Centre
HEDCOM  Heads of Departments Committee
HOA  House of Assembly
HOD  House of Delegates
HOR  House of Representatives
HR  Human Resources
HSRC  Human Sciences Research Council
IDS  Institutional Development and Support
IDSO  Institutional Development and Support official
IIEP  International Institute for Educational Planning
Intersen  Combination of the intermediate and senior phases of the schooling system (Grades 4 to 9)
IQMS  Integrated Quality Management System
JET  Joint Education Trust
KZN  KwaZulu-Natal
LCC  Local Content Curriculum [Indonesia]
LETU  Local Education and Training Unit
LPFDS  Learning Programme Facilitation, Development and Support
MBA  Master of Business Administration
MEC  Member of the Executive Council
NAPTOSA  National Professional Teachers’ Organisations of South Africa
<table>
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<tr>
<th>Acronym</th>
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<tr>
<td>NASGB</td>
<td>National Association of School Governing Bodies</td>
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<td>NECC</td>
<td>National Education Co-ordinating Committee</td>
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<td>NEPA</td>
<td>National Education Policy Act</td>
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<td>NEPAD</td>
<td>New Partnership for Africa’s Development</td>
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<td>NEPI</td>
<td>National Education Policy Investigation</td>
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<td>NGO</td>
<td>Non-governmental Organisation</td>
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<td>OBE</td>
<td>Outcomes-based Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>OECD</td>
<td>Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development</td>
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<td>OFSTED</td>
<td>Office of Standards for Education and Development</td>
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<td>PFMA</td>
<td>Public Finance Management Act</td>
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<td>PHO</td>
<td>Provincial Head Office</td>
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<td>PSA</td>
<td>Public Service Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>PSC</td>
<td>Public Service Commission</td>
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<tr>
<td>PTT</td>
<td>Provincial Task Team</td>
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<tr>
<td>PWV</td>
<td>Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging</td>
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<tr>
<td>RCL</td>
<td>Representative Council of Learners</td>
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<tr>
<td>RSA</td>
<td>Republic of South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>SADTU</td>
<td>South African Democratic Teachers Union</td>
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<tr>
<td>SAOU</td>
<td>Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie</td>
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<tr>
<td>SASA</td>
<td>South African Schools Act</td>
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<tr>
<td>SETA</td>
<td>Sector Education and Training Authority</td>
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<tr>
<td>SGB</td>
<td>School Governing Body</td>
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<td>SMT</td>
<td>Strategic Management Team</td>
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<td>TED</td>
<td>Transvaal Education Department</td>
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<td>USA</td>
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<td>United School Sports Association of South Africa</td>
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<tr>
<td>VSP</td>
<td>Voluntary Severance Package</td>
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