

Chapter 5

EXPLORING PILLARS OF PERFORMANCE: A CASE STUDY

5.1 Introduction

A key component of this thesis is a case study of Tshwane South District, which is a district of the Gauteng Department of Education. As such, this chapter (as well as Chapters 6 and 7) attempts to offer a vicarious and ‘thick description’ (Merriam, 1998) of Tshwane South District. Merriam (1998:19,29) points out that case studies are employed to gain an in-depth understanding of a situation, and that thick descriptions refers to the complete, literal description of the entity being investigated. Hence aspects such as the historical development of Tshwane South District and the physical space within which its activities occur, provide a constructive backdrop against which this case study can be experienced.

I have also drawn on what Godden and Maurice (2000, 25) term ‘the six pillars of performance for district offices’ as a basis for selecting those facets of Tshwane South District that I believe are crucial to its functioning. These include the following: structural connectedness,⁵⁹ clarity of role perception (this matter is discussed in greater detail in chapter 7), resource control, capacity, support structures and authority to act (Godden & Maurice, 2000:26). These six pillars identified by Godden and Maurice (2000) closely resemble the factors identified by Prawda (1992) in his recommendations about the factors that improve the implementation of decentralisation policy (see reference to training, resources and clarity of roles in Chapter 2).

⁵⁹ By structural connectedness, Godden and Maurice (2000, 26) refer to district participation in decision making and planning with the provincial Head office, the replication of provincial functional divisions at district level and clear lines of accountability.

Hence, through the exploration of these facets of the district office, this study illuminates its capacity to deliver effective education services to schools. In so doing, it responds to a key question of this study, namely, *how do provinces organise, structure and assign meanings to districts in the absence of national policy?* This chapter examines the key pillars of district performance through the voices of interviewees rather than official documentation, as suggested by the interpretative methodology adopted for this study (see Chapter 1). The first part of the chapter, however, reflects my personal observations of the physical space of the district office, and provides the context in which the story of the district office is best understood.

5.2 Exploring the physical space of Tshwane South District

It is easy to miss the Sunnyside, Pretoria, division of the Tshwane South District Office (D4). Firstly, the sign near the entrance of the office block reads N3 District, the name of the district prior to the GDE restructuring exercise initiated in 2000. Secondly, the district does not look like a typical office block. Instead it comes across as a residential apartment building, which indeed it was several decades ago, although it was subsequently converted into an office block. The building is flanked by a parking area on the right and a main road on the left, with trees and a fence serving as barriers between the road and the building.

After being allowed to pass through the parking entrance by a slow but pleasant security guard, visitors can easily find parking (if there is no major meeting taking place at the offices) in an open, gravelled space, hopefully under some trees for shade. A green and black plastic-covered notice, pronouncing “Welcome at District Tshwane South” greets one in the reception area of the building, which still retains the feel of a typical old apartment lobby. A receptionist on the left side of the lobby signals visitors to sign the huge book she uses to monitor people entering and leaving the building. A notice board on the right is covered with photographs relating stories of district activity such as celebrations at a Teacher Awards ceremony and programmes undertaken on World

Environment Day. A framed poster listing the *Batho Pele* Principles⁶⁰ of the Gauteng Provincial Government is strikingly visible and cannot be overlooked. Fortunately, there is also a poster that provides information about the location of various functional offices in the building. The four plants in the lobby lend a pleasant atmosphere to an otherwise dull and almost dark lobby.

A door on the right leads to two huge rooms, with the inner room (commonly referred to as the glass room by officials) enclosed by glass doors and windows. Each of the rooms contain a boardroom-sized table, around which can be seated about 15 people. Many of the bigger meetings convened by district officials take place here. On the left, further down the passage, are pigeonholes marked by names of schools, which presumably serve as post boxes for schools. The passage ends at what appears to be another reception area, but which instead turns out to be the face of the procurement unit of the district. As one of its staff members explained, the procurement unit, which is staffed by four clerks, deals with the stationery, furniture and equipment needs of the district office, but not those of schools.

On an energetic day, when stairs rather than the elevator is an option, the journey up to the higher floors is anything but tedious. The stair walls are covered with brightly coloured artefacts. Bright and clear photographs of district officials engaged in some activity or other, works of art by learners, quotations that inspire positive work ethics, and photographs accompanied by the names of officials who work in the building provide for interesting sightseeing as one makes the trip upstairs.

The building consists of five floors, with eight apartments per floor. In the old days, each apartment consisted of two and a half bedrooms, a combined bathroom and toilet, and a kitchen. The bedrooms have been converted into offices, with some sub-divided to create additional office space. The offices appear to be warm, cosy and very liveable, with staff having easy access to kitchen and ablution facilities. Boldly marked labels on the doors of the main offices clearly spell out the names and titles of officials. Little effort is needed here to find the people that one wishes to visit. The offices accommodate the District

⁶⁰ The notion of *Batho Pele* (People First) is one derived from the Public Service discourse, and is a government 'initiative to get public servants to be service oriented, to strive for excellence in service delivery and to commit to continuous service delivery improvement' (DPSA, 2003:8).

Director, staff of the Institutional Development and Support (IDS) Unit,⁶¹ the Curriculum Development and Support (CDS) Unit⁶² and the Examinations Unit.

The District Director has a large, comfortable office on the third floor of the building (which incidentally does have a working elevator), an office for his secretary and a rather smallish boardroom to which district officials generally have access for smaller meetings.

Outside of the building, on its right, are four ‘houses’ that accommodate staff from the Early Childhood Development (ECD) Unit, the Library Services Unit, and the Education Support Services (ESS)⁶³ Unit respectively. In their daily conversations, officials commonly refer to these as the ECD house or the ESS house.

One gets a sense of dispersion about the physical space of Tshwane South District. Not only are the different units of the district office dispersed between floors of the old apartment building, but they are also spread across different ‘houses’ outside of the main building. As if this is not sufficient, another division of the Tshwane South District is based at the Gauteng Provincial Government (GPG) Building in the Pretoria city centre. Hence to refer to *the* Tshwane South District Office is somewhat of a misnomer, because in reality there are two district offices – one in Sunnyside and the other in the centre of town. The town office houses the administration division of Tshwane South District, which focuses mainly on the provision of administrative support services to schools, while the Sunnyside office (which is considered to be the main office) represents the ‘professional’ wing of the district.

The physical space of the district office has been a bone of contention among schools and district officials alike for a number of reasons. Not surprisingly, there are complaints about the ten-kilometre physical divide between the administrative and professional wings of the district office, as it provides little cohesion in service delivery and often leads to inefficiencies. Even at the Sunnyside office, officials complain about the absence

⁶¹ The IDS Unit house officials who, as their title suggests, are responsible for supporting and developing institutions (schools, in this instance) as a whole. They occupy a similar position to the circuit inspectors of the past, but do not necessarily play the same role.

⁶² The CDS Unit comprises officials involved in curriculum issues. In familiar terms, they could be considered as curriculum advisors.

⁶³ The ESS unit houses officials concerned with the provision of support services to schools, such as psychological services, remedial education services, youth and culture development, and the facilitation of sports programmes

of togetherness as a result of the dispersion of offices.

For instance, one principal points out that

there is no communication between the two district offices and the two sides do not know what the other is doing (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

He also complains that he cannot pass on documents to the IDSO and has to go personally to drop off documents in town, because of the physical separation of the two offices. Another principal grumbles about the huge parking problem in town, and the time it takes him to go to both offices on official matters (Interview, principal 5, 2004). A CDS co-ordinator laments that

it is disastrous for the finance, labour relations and administration unit to be split away from us; it makes the work ten times more difficult (interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).⁶⁴

The district director also recognises the inefficiency of having split offices, and maintains that he, too, has difficulty in managing both, as it reduced effective communication between himself and the staff in town. However, he expects the Sunnyside office to be moving to join the office in the GPG building by the end of 2004. He believes that the move 'is a matter of time', and that they would move out from the Sunnyside office once the GPG building had adjusted its existing office space (Interview, district director, 2004). By August 2005, however, there was no indication that that the Sunnyside office was gearing itself to join its other half in the centre of town.⁶⁵

The design of the Sunnyside office provides little opportunity for district officials from different units to meet, nor is there adequate space for all the staff of even a single unit to meet. A CDS co-ordinator declares that

we do not have enough space for our meetings. If I have a meeting with my 38 CDS officials, I could not fit them in any room (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

In addition, she is aggrieved that she has little privacy in her office, which she shares with two other people. One of the effects of the unsuitability of the district office is that there

⁶⁴ A joint interview was held with two CDS co-ordinators. One official formally occupied the post (but acting in another post), while the other official was acting in the post of CDS co-ordinator. Much of the historical information about the district office emanates from this interview, as one official was part of the district office since its inception, while the other joined the office soon thereafter.

⁶⁵ The Sunnyside office was still intact when I last visited it in August 2005, and in my telephonic conversation with the District Deputy Director on 23 May 2005, he indicated that no firm plans were in place for the movement of the Sunnyside office to town.

is no common room for staff to gather. The CDS co-ordinator observes that

many of our human relations problems will never occur in the first place, if people met each other. There's never an opportunity for one unit to find out what another unit is doing, and from a professional point of view, it's very bad, very bad indeed (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

She also worried that 'it's an unfriendly district', since principals cannot get parking when they visit the district office.

Tshwane South District is unique in many respects, though similar to the environmental contexts of other districts in the province. According to IDSOs (Interview, group 1, 2004), the district is fortunate to have two universities in its vicinity (which facilitates easy access to service providers), and moreover, 'boasts the top 20 schools in the country'. However, it also has a significant number of schools that require improvement, at which district officials direct most of their attention (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004). Over 80% of schools in the district have Section 21 status in terms of SASA (which corresponds closely with the provincial average) (Interview, IDS co-ordinators, 2004), thus creating space for district officials to focus on matters other than administration.

Another unique feature of Tshwane South District is the visible presence of learners from the diplomatic community who attend schools in the district. IDSOs claim that they often have to serve as 'ambassadors' when they interact with the members of the diplomatic community (Interview, IDSO group 1, 2004). A concern of the district, not uncommon to other districts in the GDE, is the daily influx of refugees from other countries into the local area, as well as the frequent establishment of new informal settlements in the vicinity. This results in constant changes to the demographic profile of the district community, and impacts negatively on the stability of the district as a whole. But stability is not a concept that the district is accustomed to; dealing with change has become habitual for most district officials. As the story of the district office unfolds, one will uncover, that since its inception the district office has undergone both dramatic and evolutionary change.

5.3 In the beginning

The district office has been expanding continuously since the GDE was formally

established in 1995. Initially, the district office had only four GDE employees. It now has approximately 238 staff members.⁶⁶ The GDE district office was conceived in a former Transvaal Education Department (TED) building in central Pretoria in April 1995. The initial four GDE staff members, who for some reason were all White, were previously employed by the former DET, TED and HOR. Not surprisingly, Head Office staff often referred to the district as the 'White' district. Despite their colour, the four GDE district pioneers were not welcomed by former TED staff who still occupied their posts and offices. One official recalls that the TED staff 'shipped the GDE staff into a corner', and were very 'unfriendly' towards them, and treated them as 'intruders'. Even when the GDE moved the district office to another former TED building in Sunnyside (where the present main district office is now located), the TED superintendents who occupied the building were, according to one official, 'rude' and 'aggressive' towards the GDE staff. The female GDE staff member in particular faced much negative reaction from the former TED staff, as they considered her to be incapable of occupying a senior district office post (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Over the months, however, the former TED staff slowly moved out of their offices, either through redeployment or other rationalisation processes, and staff employed by the GDE moved into the building. It was a difficult period for the four staff members that had started out at the district, as they had to manage the absorption of new staff, allocation of office space and assume managerial roles despite their lower ranks in the system. One official, though, describes this experience as 'tremendous and wonderful, like watching a seedling growing' (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Apart from the challenges faced at the district office, the new GDE incumbents were confronted with the problem of their legitimacy within the school community. One official recalls that

there were a group of schools who were disloyal and didn't want to accept our authority; and because I was a woman, Afrikaner principals in particular could not see me as their leader (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Moreover, the district office had difficulty in promoting the implementation of the flood of new policies churned out by the new education system at the time. One official complains

⁶⁶ Figure obtained from fax received on 5 September 2005, from the Office of the Divisional Manager: OFSTED (proposed district post distribution)

They write them up there, with wonderful ideas, and not with their feet on the ground, and what irritated the schools was that the policies did not always work; the policies were not practical and principals were totally overloaded with all the new things they had to do (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

She recalls that in the first few years of the district office, schools, particularly those from former HOA and HOD education departments, resisted everything that was new, while those from DET schools, though not actively resisting new policy, simply did not implement them. She adds that district officials were left on their own, and had to work very hard against the tide of ‘resistance and aggression from schools’ that did not really offer the loyalty that the district office needed to carry out its responsibilities.

5.4 Restructuring the GDE

However, just as the district office had begun to establish itself and develop a better relationship with schools, the GDE, in 1997, initiated a process of restructuring which completely unsettled the district’s efforts. The GDE at the time was comprised of three regions (North, South and Johannesburg), and 18 districts. The regions were largely responsible for functions such as the payment of salaries, school and office maintenance, procurement, human resources, examinations and general administration, while district offices were mainly responsible for professional duties. The 1997 restructuring initiative resulted in a complete overhaul of GDE structures. By 2000, the three regions had been dissolved, and the number of districts reduced from 18 to 12. Regional functions were distributed between the district and the Provincial Head Office (PHO); districts were authorised to manage the majority of regional functions, including the payment of salaries, procurement, human resource administration, and the administration of matriculation examinations (Interviews, CDS co-ordinators and IDS co-ordinator, 2004). Mali⁶⁷ (Interview, 2004) explains the reason for the restructuring:

We realised that it was difficult to separate administration functions from professional functions because the process took too long. We needed to respond immediately to the problems of educators and schools, such as those of unpaid teachers and blocked toilets.

There were perceptions that regions were only ‘punching in information and processing salaries’, and that regional office staff were ‘overpaid and under-worked’. According to

⁶⁷ Mali is a Divisional Manager of Districts in the Provincial Head Office. He was involved in the GDE restructuring process, and hence provides an insider’s view of the restructuring period.

Mali (Interview, 2004), this resulted in ‘unnecessary costs and delays in decision-making’. However, efficiency and effectiveness rationales were not the only ones that drove the GDE restructuring process. The 1997 GDE restructuring initiative coincided with an important political call from central government. Mali (Interview, 2004) mentions that

in 1997, there was a national Cabinet decision that all provinces had to demarcate the boundaries of their sub-structures in line with local government boundaries so that the provincial departments could support and reinforce each other ... so when we started restructuring, we had to look at that as well.

Although the GDE had not been directed by the Premier’s office to align its district boundaries with those of local government, the GDE Broad Management Team (BMT) accepted and recognised the need for such alignment (Interview, Mali, 2004). The GDE only finalised its structures and boundaries in 2000, as it had to wait for local government boundaries to be finalised.⁶⁸ On reflecting upon the reasons for the first restructuring process of the GDE, Chanee⁶⁹ (Interview, 2004), supports the explanation provided by Mali. He points out that restructuring of the GDE in the 1997 period occurred for four reasons:

- ❑ It was necessary that district offices respond to a torrent of requests from schools to deal with a range of issues such as maintenance and leave, which districts were not designed to deal with.
- ❑ The Department of Public Service and Administration (DPSA) White Paper influenced the GDE. The White Paper highlighted the need for efficient, effective and people-centred public service delivery through the principles of *Batho Pele*.
- ❑ The GDE needed to rationalise its bureaucracy in the light of a range of new policies related to adult basic education and training (ABET), further education and training (FET) and the school curriculum.
- ❑ The GDE needed to align service delivery with local government boundaries. Chanee (Interview, 2004) notes that the call came from the DPSA and the provincial government, as well as the education MEC, with influence from HEDCOM and CEM structures.

⁶⁸ According to Mali, there was a directive from the then Minister of Provincial and Local Government, Sydney Mafumadi, that provinces should coincide the boundaries of their sub-structures to those of local government after the latter were finalised.

⁶⁹ Albert Chanee holds the post of Manager: Policy and Planning in the PHO, but is presently Acting Divisional Manager: OFSTED in the PHO.

The first restructuring efforts of the GDE had a devastating effect on the district office. Boundaries were adjusted, staff were moved, new posts were created and some old ones abolished, and the number of schools that the district office had to service increased to about 224. Lateral movement of functions also affected the workload of district officials. IDSOs claim that functions such as the implementation of post provisioning norms, for which they had just managed to develop some expertise, was moved to the Human Resources Unit, while the responsibility for dealing with teacher disciplinary matters was transferred to the Labour Relations Unit (Interview, IDS Group 2, 2004). Relationships with schools that had been painstakingly developed in the initial years of the GDE were dislodged, and new relations forged. A principal (Interview, principal 2, 2004) observes that her school was moved to another cluster, which was geographically illogical, as only four out of seven schools were located close to each other. In addition, the volume of district posts increased so dramatically that there was just not enough space to house everybody in the district office (Interview, IDS Group 3, 2004).

Although the decentralisation of functions from regions to district offices was geared at improving the quality of service delivery, there is little evidence that this did indeed occur. The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004), for example, contends that

restructuring did not translate into quality service delivery, since IDS officials are now responsible for a larger number of schools. Also the restructuring did not make much difference, and the regional office was much better.

The restructuring efforts of the GDE did not end there. In 2001, there was another initiative, this time driven by the Premier's office. This scheme re-centralised some of the services that had been shifted from the regions to the districts, to a centralised agency, the Gauteng Shared Services Centre. It is perhaps prudent to explain briefly what the GSSC is, as there has been only passing reference to it thus far in this thesis. Chanee (Interview, 2004) explains that the GSSC was established to act as a service provider for corporate functions of the 11 departments in Gauteng. Hence it is a structure that functions across sectoral boundaries in the province; it is not solely accountable to a particular government department, but to the Gauteng government as a whole.

The establishment of the GSSC in 2002 was a decision of the Gauteng provincial cabinet and driven by the premier's office (interview, Mali: 2004). It was conceived on the basis of classic arguments for centralisation, namely, the need for economies of scale, greater

efficiency, improved effectiveness, and the anticipation that fraud and corruption, which was perceived as being a major problem across all the departments of the province, would be more easily controlled (Interviews, provincial and district officials, 2004). Hence some functions (such as tendering for services), that belonged to districts prior to 2002, were subsequently centralised by shifting them to the GSSC.

Functions such as the procurement of goods and services, salaries and account payments were also removed from districts. These had been taken over by districts over just two years ago from the defunct regions of the GDE, and were handed over to the GSSC. IDS officials claim that

before we had the power to procure our own services, like selecting service providers to do financial training for principals, but now the GSSC makes decisions on who the service provider should be (Interview, IDS Group 1, 2004).

District and provincial officials explain that the rationale for the GSSC was that it would improve efficiency through economies of scale, effectiveness and turn-around delivery time (Interview, Rampersad, 2004).⁷⁰ In addition, it was believed that the creation of a centralised agency would reduce the high level of fraud, mismanagement and corruption that existed in most of Gauteng's government departments (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004). Many senior GDE officials did not welcome the establishment of the GSSC in 2002, as they believed that districts could cope with the functions for which they were already responsible. Mali (Interview, 2004) remarks that 'the GSSC was created around one individual, namely the Premier', and that he was uncertain whether a new premier would continue to support the idea of the GSSC. As pointed out in the next chapter, many officials demonstrate little confidence in the ability of the GSSC to provide efficient and effective services. Mali (Interview, 2004) adds that many provincial departments are not positive about the GSSC because they believe that it is neither efficient nor effective. Some officials (see Chapter 6) point to recent improvements in the capacity of the GSSC to deliver services, and charitably explain away the poor services provided by the GSSC as 'teething problems'. However, as Chanee (Interview, 2004) remarks, 'it is still too early to say whether it is working'.

The restructuring efforts of the GDE continue to this day, though to a less dramatic extent. There is ongoing tweaking of the GDE organogram, with district posts and

⁷⁰ Reena Rampersad holds the post of Chief Director: Curriculum Professional Development and Support in the Provincial Head Office.

functions constantly shifted, added or removed. One frustrated district official complains that

it's all very unsettling; it just seems that we could never settle down. As soon as we have, the Department starts reshuffling (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

She adds:

It's all very distressing because some posts still haven't been sorted out. For example, there has been talk of posts for psychologists, and it's not clear whether these will be based at schools or at the district office. It's also not clear what all the ESS posts are going to be used for (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

The constant changes have impacted negatively on staff morale, as they feel insecure in an unstable environment. The changes to the organogram have also led to much confusion and disorganisation in the system. Officials cite a case where two permanent staff members had to reapply for their posts because they were 'forgotten' by the PHO (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

It is evident that the district office has been plagued with volatile change since its inception. In the early days, it moved its location from central town to Sunnyside, and subsequently expanded with additional offices in another part of town. New functions were designated to it when regions were removed from the GDE landscape, and withdrawn again with the establishment of the GSSC. The district office has to now service more schools than it had to prior to 2001, and its staff complement has increased dramatically. Units have been done away with, new units added, and staff and functions have moved both laterally and vertically. The latest organogram has yet to be fully implemented. Further changes are envisaged. The Sunnyside office is expected to soon join its other half in the GPG building, and a further complement of 12 new staff members are expected to join the office to support the implementation of the new FET curriculum (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004). As Mali (Interview, 2004) predicts, there remains a possibility that the idea of the GSSC may be reviewed if a new provincial premier deems fit. It is a wonder that district officials have managed to keep their feet on the ground, with such strong winds of change billowing constantly around them. And on a less important note, it probably explains why the Sunnyside district office has not as yet changed its sign from District N3, to Tshwane South District!

Much of the instability, unpredictability and volatility in the district can be associated with the broader transformation agenda of the state: the deracialisation of the education

system, the establishment of new provincial government departments underpinned by a new service delivery ethos, and the aspiration towards instituting a culture of learning and teaching in schools. In addition, major education policies such as Curriculum 2005 and those derived from the South African Schools Act have radically changed how schools govern themselves, and have provided new perspectives on teaching and learning.

However, other factors, of a more overtly political nature, have also influenced the path followed by the GDE. The notion of integrated service delivery, which presupposes a level of structural alignment between government departments and local government, has been a key driver in revising the geographical boundaries of education districts. And the personal inclination of the Gauteng Premier, in favouring the creation of the GSSC, has dramatically changed the roles and functions of the district office. These unprecedented and profound changes that have overwhelmed the district office, have driven stakeholders to express a strong desire for greater stability in the system.

One of the effects of such high-level, ongoing change is the tendency on the part of district officials to adopt a somewhat mechanistic and passive role in the execution of their duties. As outlined in Chapter 6, evidence of this phenomenon already exists in the way in which some district officials relate to schools.

5.5 The district and its staff

The district office currently has about 238 staff members, responsible for servicing a total of 224 schools in the district – 136 primary schools, 90 secondary schools and 48 independent schools (see district profile in Appendix 4). In addition, the district services six Adult Basic Education and Training Centres (with 35 sites), and 52 Early Childhood Development Centres.⁷¹ Tshwane South District represents one the bigger districts of the GDE in terms of its staff complement and the number of schools it services.

The district office is headed by a district director who is responsible for overseeing the functioning of six sub-directorates. These include the Curriculum Development and

⁷¹ throughout this section, information on the staff profile of districts has been obtained from the GDE organogram (GDE, 2005) and from a fax received on 9 September 2005 from the OFSTED Division. Information on the number of schools in the district has been obtained from the EMIS Unit of the GDE via an e-mail received by me on 23 June 2005.

Support, Education Support Services, Institutional Development and Support, Finance and Administration, Human Resources Management, and Human Resources Administration sub-directorates. Two units, responsible for the curriculum information system and policy and planning, are based in the office of the District Director. The various sub-directorates, as their titles suggest, undertake a wide range of tasks ranging from school support and monitoring, to administrative functions related to the district office itself.

The district office is organised to closely resemble that of the Provincial Head Office (PHO), though it does not reflect the same level of specialisation as the PHO, which has about 17 Directorates with Divisions and Branches at the higher levels of its organisation (GDE, 2005). This translates to a total of 1 456 staff members at the PHO, compared to the 238 staff members at the district office. More specifically, the PHO has 347 professional staff, compared to 108 professional staff members at the Tshwane South District Office.

Clearly the PHO is a far larger organisation than the district. One of the effects of a weighty top structure with a thinner lower layer is that smaller numbers of staff at the district level are expected to take forward the initiatives of a larger complement of specialised staff at the PHO, resulting in work overload at the district level. For example, the PHO has specialised staff to manage issues such as HIV, AIDS and school nutrition, while the district office has no such specialised staff. Hence the activities emanating from the desks of the PHO staff have to be accommodated by district staff that already carry responsibility for their own core functions.

De Grauwe and Varghese (2000:19) advocate that an education system should be top-light and bottom-heavy to ensure that adequate support services are provided to schools. They argue that staff who are closest to schools should be plentiful, while staffing levels at the higher levels of the system should be small. Clearly, this is not so in the case of the GDE, where the reverse is the norm.

The 238 staff members of Tshwane South are split almost in half between professional and administrative staff (Interview, District Director, 2004). Officials that interact most frequently at a personal level with the 224 schools are those from the IDS, Curriculum

and ESS units.

IDS officials are central to the maintenance of a link between the district office and schools, as they are responsible for overseeing the overall functionality of schools, and in Tshwane South enjoy a relatively favourable ratio with respect to the number of schools they service. Each IDSO is allocated between 15 and 18 schools, for which they are individually responsible (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). This ratio compares favourably with other provinces, where IDS ratios are much higher, sometimes reaching 1:45, as is the case in Limpopo (DoE, 2003a).

GDE IDSOs can expect even fewer schools to manage in the near future. Chanee (Interview, 2004) indicates that the GDE has planned to reduce its current average IDSO to schools ratio of 1:18 to 1:15 in the near future. The planned reduction in the number of schools under the jurisdiction of IDSOs probably relates to their complaints about work overload. IDSOs argue for additional district staff that could undertake specialised tasks such as admissions, governance and facilities, as they are unable to deal both with these (in terms of the portfolios they have been allocated) as well as school support and monitoring (Interview, IDS Group 3, 2004). IDSOs are also concerned about the shortage of secretarial services available to the IDS Unit. The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) points out, for example, that there are only two secretaries to support 12 IDSOs, resulting in IDSOs being unable to cope with their workload.

Concern have been expressed by a number of principals about the poor levels of professional expertise of IDS staff and their lack of experience (see Chapter 6). The IDS co-ordinator recognises that most IDSOs have little experience of the post-1994 school management and governance environment. However, he points out that there is a wealth of formal knowledge among IDSOs in terms of qualifications, as six of the 12 IDSOs in the district have doctorates in education management, while several others qualified as Masters of Business Administration (MBAs). Hence the district office believes that IDSOs can only meet the challenges confronting them at schools by sharing their experiences and working together in teams (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

Curriculum staff serve as the arms and legs of curriculum delivery, and hold the rank of first education specialists. According to the district organogram, there are a total of 49

first education specialist posts responsible for curriculum delivery matters. Prior to May 2004, curriculum staff held the rather protracted and complex title of Learning Programme Facilitation, Development and Support (LPFDS) officials. Since then, however, they carry the more subdued title of Curriculum Development and Support officials. Curriculum staff are still coming to terms with their new title, and are often unsure whether they are CSD (curriculum support and development) or CDS (curriculum development and support) officials (informal conversation held with the General Education and Training [GET] co-ordinator on 2 February 2005).

The CDS Unit is split into different phases of school support: Early Childhood Development (8); Intersen⁷² (14); Further Education and Training (24); Adult Basic Education and Training (3) (GDE, 2005). Although these numbers appear to be impressive (particularly when one compares them with similar posts in other provinces), with the exception of the number of ECD posts, they still represent low district office staff to school ratios. For example, Intersen and FET posts represent subject or learning area specialist posts; consequently, there would be only one district official with, say, a mathematics background to service the approximately 136 primary schools in the district, or there might be only one accounting specialist to support the 90 secondary schools in the district (EMIS, e-mail, 23 June 2005). In total, 22 ECD and Intersen staff are involved in curriculum support and the monitoring of curriculum implementation of 2 310 primary school teachers in the district. Similarly, 24 FET district officials are responsible for curriculum support and monitoring of 2 544 secondary school teachers.

Given that there are only 200 days in the school calendar, district officials tasked with the responsibility of providing curriculum support to schools can visit a particular school no more than two or three times a year. The nature of support provided by district officials to schools is explored later in this thesis. What is disturbing about the district organogram, though, is the low number of posts allocated to the aspect concerned with learning and teaching support material. There are only three posts available for this facet of curriculum delivery, suggesting that the GDE confers little importance to district involvement in the development of learning and teaching material that could be responsive to local district conditions. A positive element of the district staff profile, however, is that the district office has 13 psychologist posts (GDE, 2005), potentially a source of excellent support to

⁷² The Intersen Phase refers to the combination of the intermediate and senior phases of the schooling system. It includes Grades 4 to 9.

schools plagued by severe social problems such as HIV and AIDS, poverty, crime and family breakdown.

The district office has three officials responsible for providing labour relations support to schools (GDE, 2005). Given the complaints by some schools about the slowness with which labour relations are dealt with, it seems probable that the labour relations staff complement may be too small to manage the number of cases brought to their attention. In addition, the lack of provision for the post of legal specialist in the district office compromises the ability of district officials to deal with matters related to labour and governance. IDSOs complain that they are ‘sitting’ with provincial regulations that have not been amended in line with SASA, and consequently are often beleaguered by a host of legal problems (Interview, IDSO Group 2, 2004). IDSOs have also drawn attention to this problem (see Chapter 6), in the context of the more sophisticated lawyers who occupy positions on SGBs and often undermine them on both labour and governance matters.

In general, Tshwane South District appears to be blessed with a reasonable staff complement compared to other provinces (DoE, 2003a). However, the numbers remain insufficient to meet the demands of the support, management and policy roles expected of districts. The broader education transformation context characterised by constant shifts and adjustments in policy places much pressure on districts to facilitate change in schools, and to support schools in implementing new policy. In addition, though the district office also appears to house a sound range of functions suitable to meeting the needs of schools, the absence of some functions such as legal services, compromises the ability of the district office to undertake its responsibilities adequately, while the under-representation of staff for functions such as materials development weakens the capacity of districts to play a stronger role in adapting the curriculum to the local context. Furthermore, specialised functions (such as admissions, facilities and governance) that are currently carried by IDSOs through specified portfolios, appear to dilute the capacity of IDSOs to provide focused support to schools. An area that appears to have been given scant attention to by the district office, (see Chapters 6 and 7) is that of the relationship between schools and communities.

The National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB, Interview, 2004) points

out that rampant crime and vandalism in schools, and high levels of learner absenteeism, are indicative of the gap that exists between schools and communities. It proposes that district offices include a person akin to a Community Liaison Officer, who could be involved in strengthening relationships between districts and the community. It argues that such a person could play an important role in matters such as the advocacy of policy, reducing the tension between schools and communities, and ensuring that learners are not out of school (Interview, NASGB, 2004). Such a post, if occupied by a well-trained, community-oriented official would certainly contribute to closing the gap between schools and communities, which the NASGB argues exists presently.

5.6 Capacity building of principals and teachers

Capacity building of principals and teachers is a priority in the GDE. Much of it takes the form of workshops conducted either by district officials themselves or by non-governmental organisations (NGOs) and universities contracted by the GDE. In addition, the GDE has recently selected 100 principals and deputy principals to register for an Advanced Certificate in Education (ACE) course in management offered by the University of the Witwatersrand (Interview, principal 7, 2004). The course is paid for by the GDE.

Principals attend numerous workshops organised by the GDE. However, the frequency of workshops has diminished compared to the past when many new policies were being introduced to the system. According to one principal,

we had more workshops in the past because of new policies but things are now more settled (Interview, principal 1, 2004).

Workshops are geared towards helping principals to interpret policy and manage their schools better (Interview, principals 3 and 4, 2004). On average, principals attended about five to six workshops over the past two years, covering aspects such as school safety, financial management, HIV and AIDS, and educator conditions of service (Interview, principals 1, 7, 8, 2004). Principals are also encouraged to attend seminars and symposia organised by the GDE Provincial Head Office, and in some instances are selected to attend such events (Interview, principal 7, 2004).

In general, principals find GDE workshops to be ‘quite good’, and indicate that they have learned about teamwork and delegation of duties among school staff (Interview, principal 4, 2004). Principals presented no negative impressions about the capacity building programmes organised by the district office or the GDE. However, SGB capacity-building programmes are not viewed as positively. The Federation of School Governing Bodies of South Africa representative (FEDSAS) (Interview, 2004), for example, believes that the training available to SGBs is ‘of poor quality’. It claims that ‘FEDSAS and NASGB can do better training’, while the NASGB argues for a change in the focus of SGB training from ‘roles and responsibilities’ to problem-solving approaches. An additional concern raised by the NASGB was the poor timing of SGB training, which they claim is unsuitable for parents. However, district officials cannot be faulted for the poor quality and ill-timed training of SGBs. IDSOs complain that

training of SGBs and SMTs is done by the PHO directly. The PHO selects service providers who the district office has no confidence in. We feel that the district office knows more (Interview, IDSO group 1, 2004).

Furthermore, IDSOs believe that ‘the PHO is too stringent on how the budget is used’. They are also demotivated since they identify training needs and develop plans to implement training programmes, but are not provided with a budget to carry them out (Interview, IDSO group 1, 2004).

Like principals, teachers participate in many workshops organised by the district office and the GDE. Teachers report that they attend two to three workshops in a year, most of them related to the new curriculum policy (Interviews, teachers 1, 3, 5, 7, 2004). In terms of training on outcomes-based education (OBE), one teacher indicated that she underwent two weeks of training on OBE in 1999, one week of training in 2003, and in 2004 she received training on the revised curriculum through the University of South Africa, who were contracted by the GDE to train teachers on the new curriculum.

In addition to attending workshops directed at introducing teachers to the new curriculum (which are, in the main, planned for and organised by the PHO), some teachers have been exposed to more teaching-focused workshops such as on reading (Interview, teacher 1, 2004), computer literacy (Interview, teacher 4, 2004), HIV/AIDS and sexuality (Interview, teacher 1, 2004), workshops focusing on ‘how to teach’, and meetings to discuss learning problems diagnosed in matriculation examinations (Interview, teacher 5, 2004). In addition, teachers can register at the University of South Africa for certified

courses on OBE (paid for by the GDE) (Interview, teacher 3, 2004), as well as undertake certified computer courses also paid for by the GDE (Interview, teacher 7, 2004). While some teachers report that ‘people are clear after the workshops’ (Interview, teacher 3, 2004), and that the workshops ‘are helpful’ (Interview, teacher 4, 2004), others complain that

OBE workshops are merely information sessions; they need to be hands on; we need information in layman’s language; workshops must be in a practical setting, not academic (interviews, teachers 6 and 7, 2004).

One aggrieved principal also grumbled that

teachers go through crash courses, but at the end there is no value, no knowledge. Teachers are not equipped to teach Curriculum 2005. We have learners in Grade 8 who cannot even read or write (Interview, principal 3, 2004).

As is evident, many of the capacity-building workshops are aimed at orienting teachers to the new curriculum and thus are centrally planned and budgeted for; the role of the district office in this instance is limited to practical organisation. Capacity-building activities initiated and planned for by districts are not highly visible. This is perhaps understandable as the introduction of Curriculum 2005 to the system in 1999, and its revision several years later, has compelled districts and the GDE to direct their efforts at policy orientation and policy transmission, rather than responding to actual teaching problems raised by teachers or diagnosed by the district office. This scenario is likely to continue for the next few years for those engaged in teaching Grades 10, 11 and 12, as the new FET curriculum is expected to be introduced to schools in 2006. However, there is opportunity now for district officials to initiate their own capacity-building programmes for teachers in the GET band, as they have finally reached some level of policy stability (at least in terms of macro-level policy).

5.7 The district budget

The district office receives its budgetary allocation from the Provincial Head Office through a paper budget system. Its 2004/2005 budget of R79m (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004) covers only non-personnel expenditure, as personnel costs are transacted at the PHO. The paper budget system implies that the district does not operate its own bank account, and has limited powers to authorise payments. It does receive a petty cash budget of R500 at a time, to deal with small emergencies and entertainment (Interview,

District Director, 2004). All of the district's procurement of both goods and services occurs via the GSSC (see above and chapter 6). For a district official to access funds, the district finance department has to first approve a requisition, and route the necessary procurement forms via the district procurement office to the GSSC.

The budget includes expenditure for the district office and to a smaller extent, schools. In the case of the latter, it is only used to carry new schools that have opened in the middle of the financial year (Interview, District Director, 2004). The district office budget is used for the purchase of office equipment, stationery and furniture, for the payment of services such as water, electricity and the telephone, and for the professional development of teachers, principals and district staff. A substantial part of the budget is used to hire government vehicles or to subsidise vehicles owned by staff (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2005). The IDS co-ordinator indicated that in 2003, 90% of the IDS Unit budget was spent on transport.

The budget for the district office is structured along similar lines to that of the PHO. In both instances, the budget is allocated according to eight programmes, namely, curriculum, IDS, ESS, management, human resources, schools, administration and ECD. Sub-programmes and objectives to which expenditure has to adhere, accompany each of the eight programmes. The district has no authority to shift budgets across programmes. Should the district office find it necessary to do so, it has to apply for 'veriments' to the Chief Financial Officer (based at the PHO), who has to authorise the shift of budget from one programme to another (Interview, District Director, 2004).

One of the drawbacks of this system is that Programme Managers at the PHO, who are responsible and accountable for the eight programmes and their budgets, have limited control over how programme budgets are used in districts. Rampersad (Interview, 2004), for instance, indicates that she is totally accountable and has full oversight over the curriculum programme itself, but not over the entire curriculum budget. She points out that the District Director is responsible and accountable for the district component of the programme budget in terms of the Public Finance Management Act (PFMA).

The present system reflects some anomalies, given the close alignment between programme delivery and programme budgets. The PHO Divisional Manager for

Curriculum, for example, has an oversight function for the implementation of curriculum programmes, but has no control over the curriculum budget at the district level. Hence there is a dilution of the alignment between programmes and budgets as one goes down to the district level of the system, pointing to tensions regarding accountability (see later in this chapter).

Budgetary planning is not the exclusive domain of the PHO. The priorities of district offices, based on their operational plans, are taken to provincial forums where they are subject to discussion (Interview, Mali, 2004). Some provincial Units, such as the Curriculum Unit, attempt to promote alignment between programmes and programme budgets through joint budget planning between the PHO and the district office. Rampersad (Interview, 2004), for instance, claims that

both PHO and district officials are involved jointly in planning for curriculum programme budgets.

However, lower-level district officials do not appear to feel the effects of joint budgetary planning. ESS officials (Interview, 2004), for instance, complain that

the budget is determined at the PHO; we have to often adjust our own operational plans to fit in with the plans and priorities of the PHO.

CDS officials, speaking in the context of special projects initiated by the PHO and supported by districts, feel that

the PHO wants to dictate which projects to run; the district office does not initiate its own projects like the School Improvement Project (Interview, CDS group, 2004).

District offices are expected to develop action plans based on the strategic objectives and programmes developed at the national and provincial level. The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) feels that districts have little leeway with respect to budgetary expenditure as 'we can only spend according to budgets allocated to specific programmes'. On further introspection, he does acknowledge that the District Director does have some space for the movement of budgets from one programme to another, with the permission of the Chief Financial Officer.

The District Director is concerned about the severe budget cut received by districts in 2003/2004 financial year. He points out that his district received about 30% less than it had budgeted for. However, it is not only districts that are affected. The District Director

notes that the GDE as a whole ‘has been under-funded over the past three years’ because the allocated budget does not take into account the influx of people from other provinces into Gauteng (Interview, District Director, 2004). The IDS co-ordinator has also received a major blow to his budget. He indicates that the IDS budget was cut down significantly in the 2004/2005 financial year, from R660 000 in the previous year to R550 000 in the current year. The dramatically reduced budget is explained in part by changes in the way the system budgets for car subsidies paid to staff members. Previously, car subsidies were regarded as a component of personnel costs, but are now recognised as a travel cost, which is a non-personnel budget item. The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) points out that 90% of the 2004/2005 financial year budget was directed at meeting travel costs, leaving no money to meet many programme objectives such as the organisation of professional development workshops. In addition, there are limited funds available to purchase stationery and pay for the maintenance of computer equipment at the district office.

District offices have limited autonomy with respect to the use of their budgets, both in terms of decisions regarding the allocation of budgets to programmes, and in terms of budget administration. However, mechanisms such as joint budgetary planning with the PHO, if they occur as indicated by the Curriculum Programme manager, do to some degree alleviate the symptoms of the lack of district budget autonomy. Clearly, though, given the comments made by ESS and other district officials (see above), mechanisms for joint planning need to be strengthened. In addition, the ‘concession’ granted by the GDE to districts to shift budgets across programme items (with authorisation from the Chief Financial Officer) does provide the district office with some leeway to elbow itself out of difficult situations. However, as the IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) remarked, at a fundamental level ‘district offices function like Section 20 schools’. Districts do not receive a total budget which they can manipulate themselves for the implementation of their programmes.

Moreover, large-scale teacher training programmes for the introduction of new curriculum policies is centrally planned and budgeted for. The role of district officials in this instance is merely to promote their implementation. Rampersad (Interview, 2004) confirms that 70% of the curriculum budget is based at the PHO, while districts receive only 30%. She attributes this to the centralised ‘roll out’ for the implementation of new

curriculum policies, but adds that the curriculum provincial to district budget ratio is expected to be inverted by 2011, when greater stability in curriculum policy is envisaged.

5.8 District office resources

The story of district resources is fraught with problems, frustrations and complaints. It is a tale of whines, moans, gripes, grumbles and groans. CDS officials (Group interview, 2004) lament that

the district office infrastructure is not supportive; we have limited access to vehicles, there are no computers, no e-mails, no printers and we cannot make telephone calls to cell phone numbers.

(Note, however, that officials do receive a sum of R100 per month for using their own cell phones.) The biggest obstacle facing district officials in their daily work is the lack of computers. CDS co-ordinators (Interview, 2004) allege that ‘we had to wait for a long time before our offices were equipped, and we are still battling’. Initially most staff members had their own computers, but over half of these are currently not operational because they have not been serviced (Interview, IDS Co-ordinator, 2004). The maintenance function lies at the PHO which, according to the IDS co-ordinator, ‘has little capacity to deal with the problems of districts’. Moreover, there is little incentive on the part of the PHO to repair and maintain the servers because the district office may soon be moving to another location (see Chapter 6). The office has few e-mail points, most of which are not working. A senior district official moans that

I had a good e-mail connection before, but now it is a disaster; it’s been down for a long time; there are constant problems, constant problems with the e-mail (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Many staff use their own computers at home to e-mail at their own expense. The centralised telephone line system also poses a major obstacle to the work of district officials. IDS officials complain that

the telephone system is in a mess; we cannot access telephone lines, because there are not enough of them (Interview, IDSO group 1, 2004).

I, too, in the course of my research often had difficulty accessing the district office telephonically, as the lines were often already occupied. Access to printers is predictably an even worse problem. There are very few printers in the office, and the CDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) claims, ‘I only got a printer after making a song and dance’.

Apart from material problems associated with the lack of resources, district officials are embarrassed about their 'poor' status relative to schools, many of which in this district have computers and other facilities (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004).

Access to transport is another major impediment to district effectiveness. The district operates on two transport systems: a subsidised car system, and the leasing of cars from the Government Garage, which is managed by the Department of Transport. Car subsidies are available to senior district officials and those who frequently travel to schools. The latter have to demonstrate a mileage of about 1000 kilometres per month for official work undertaken (Interview, CDS group, 2004). To date, only some senior officials, a few IDS officials and four CDS officials have taken up the offer of the subsidy system. The system of leasing cars from the Government Garage is subject to budget availability, which officials claim is inadequate to cover the high leasing costs of R1 400 per month. CDS co-ordinators (Interview, 2004) declare that

Government Garage cars are limited; they are only allocated through begging.

In 2004, the 34 CDS officials in the office had access to 15 leased cars, distributed among the different curriculum sub-units: Intersen (4), Assessment (1), FET (6), Foundation Phase (4) (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004). On the face of it, 15 cars for 30 officials does not appear to be as grim as made out by officials, particularly when one compares the situation to other provinces where problems of access to vehicles are far greater (DoE, 2003a). It appears, though, that the cumbersome procedures involved in accessing leased vehicles presents an even bigger problem to district officials. CDS officials, for example, are expected to seek approval from their Heads, as well as the District Director when applying for a vehicle. The application is then taken to the transport section for completion of the process. On their return, officials have to complete additional documentation (Interview, CDS group, 2004). One official, in describing her experience of car leasing, alleges that

it takes half an hour to drive out of the gate, and half an hour to return to our office from the gate (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

In addition, CDS officials maintain that they end up being inefficient because they are compelled to visit schools in teams because of the shortage of vehicles. District officials are not allowed to use their personal vehicles for school visits as there are no systems in place to facilitate this, and legal problems such as insurance come into play.

The lack of computer, printer and e-mail facilities for district officials is clearly a barrier to their effectiveness. The impending relocation of the main district office is an added dynamic as it prevents investment into the maintenance of office equipment. Clearly, district officials are justified in feeling aggrieved about this situation. As one official declared

if the GDE wants us to do the job, they must provide the tools; it's the employer's responsibility (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

The situation with respect to access to vehicles is different. The problem in this instance appears to be one of cumbersome procedures and planning, rather than the availability of budgets for leasing vehicles.

5.9 District accountability

GDE districts are accountable to the Provincial Head Office via the District Director, while lower-level district officials are accountable to their seniors in particular Units within districts. In the jargon of decentralisation literature, the accountability system deems districts as organisations reflecting a form of integrated deconcentration (see Chapter 2; Cheema & Rondenelli, 1983). This means that district staff work under the jurisdiction of the District Director, as opposed to their senior counterparts at the PHO. The District Director, however, reports to and is accountable to the District Divisional Manager at the PHO, who in turn is located in the Operations Branch of the GDE. As is commonly found in the South African public service, accountability within the district office occurs through a rank system, where higher-ranking officials supervise lower-ranking officials in a Unit.

Although in theory accountability is expected to occur within the district office itself, PHO officials recognise that there is a problem of dual accountability, since district officials, in practice, are often expected to respond to demands set both by their seniors in the district office, as well as their counterparts at the PHO.

De Clerq (2002) refers to the dual lines of accountability as 'hard and soft' accountability. The former represents the solid line of accountability from lower-level officials in the district office to higher-level officials, while the latter reflects a dotted line of

accountability from district officials to senior programme-based officials at the PHO. Rampersad (Interview, 2004) observes that ‘there is a disjuncture between bureaucratic and programmatic accountability’, but is concerned that the former takes precedence over the latter. Understandably, Programme Heads at the PHO would prefer to exert control over the activities of district officials, as they themselves are responsible for ensuring that programmes are delivered in accordance with the objectives and targets that they have set for programme deliverables.

The GDE, in recognising the problem of dual accountability, has established communication protocols to prevent the dotted line of accountability from taking root. Thus PHO Programme Managers can now access and communicate with their counterparts at the district level only via the District Divisional Manager based at Head Office, who in turn communicates with the District Director. Rampersad (Interview, 2004) complains that the new protocols have resulted in some PHO Programme Managers having difficulty accessing information and reports from district offices, as they have to go through the District Divisional Managers to obtain what they need from districts. The District Director is tasked with the responsibility of ensuring that his officials are not required to be at two places at the same time, and therefore of prioritising their activities. While this system has advantages, one of which is that it seeks to prevent district officials from being buffeted on all sides, it does undermine the focus on meeting targets set by PHO Programme Managers. However, as indicated earlier in this chapter, specialised forums convened by the PHO are expected to facilitate greater contact between district and PHO officials, and enhance information flows between the two levels of the system.

With respect to performance-based accountability, to date there is no working system of educator appraisal in GDE district offices. The Development Appraisal System (DAS) launched by the Department of Education never really took off in districts. Instead a new system, the Integrated Quality Management System (IQMS) has been introduced by the Department, though not implemented as yet in GDE districts. The IQMS is linked to a system of performance monitoring and rewards and, according to Chanee (Interview, 2004), is still highly contested, because ‘it pressurises district offices to justify their performance’. The GDE has developed a sophisticated plan for instituting the IQMS, which requires districts to develop district improvement plans based on school

improvement plans. However, it has not at yet established systems to operationalised the plans (Interview, Chanee, 2004).

There is a performance appraisal system, though, for district staff employed under the Public Service Act (PSA) (namely, the administrative staff) and for the District Director. Administrative staff are appraised in terms of a performance appraisal system instituted by the Department of Public Service and Administration, based on measuring staff performance against the realisation of predetermined targets (interviews, District Director and Rampersad, 2004). According to Chanee (interview, 2004), the effectiveness of the scorecard system rests on the ability of officials at higher levels to ‘regulate the contract and look for evidence’. The Tshwane South District Director (Interview, 2004) raised no concerns about the scorecard system, and appears to be fairly satisfied with it.

The accountability systems referred to above reflect two dominant features. Firstly, the systems focus on individual accountability rather than institutional accountability. Secondly, they focus on upward accountability, rather than accountability to schools. The former implies that there are no accountability mechanisms for districts as organisations, and rests on the assumption that the individual parts add up to the whole. Hence there are no standards or benchmarks against which district (as opposed to individual) performance can be measured. The latter points to an emphasis on bureaucratic line accountability, rather than accountability to the ‘client’, namely the school. The absence of accountability mechanisms that facilitate a downward focus rather than an upward mindset tends to drive district officials to look up at the PHO for their agenda, rather than at schools (see Chapter 6).

5.10 The legal status of districts

A number of South African writers have raised concerns about the absence of a legislative framework that spells out the powers and functions of districts (Taylor *et al.*, 2003; DDSP, 2003; Roberts, 2001; Godden & Maurice, 2000). Taylor *et al.* (2003:118) note that ‘the absence of a coherent legislative framework at national level results in confusions concerning the functions of the district office’; while Roberts (2001:5) observes that ‘because the legal powers of districts are not clearly spelled out by legislation, it is not uncommon to read about problems in individual schools being

referred to the highest authority in provinces'. At a national conference on districts hosted by the Department of Education in 1999, Godden and Maurice (2000:28) advocated that the national agenda should 'through legislation, clarify and establish the legal framework and authority of district offices'.

Persistent calls for a district legislative framework over the past decade have, however, not borne fruit. Provinces to date have not legislated on districts, and there appears to be a simple reason for this. Malherbe (Interview, 2004) explains from a legal perspective why districts are not legislated for. He points out that

districts are subdivisions of PHOs and have to execute decisions of the provincial departments. Districts are an administrative arrangement, that is why they are not legislated for.

Boshoff (Interview, 2004) queries the need for districts to be established as legal entities. He asserts that districts, unlike the national, provincial and school levels of the system, are administrative and management entities that are part of a larger function and need not be legislated for. Boshoff adds that provincial legislation does not deal with districts, because Acts in general do not deal with structures; hence in South Africa districts are established through administrative law rather than general legislation. He also points out that if districts were to be legal entities, they would require original powers with an original budget, and consequently be subject to civil oversight.

Malherbe (Interview, 2004) also argues that the creation of districts as legal entities would require public and political responsibility and would be akin to creating another sphere of governance. Both Malherbe and Boshoff, therefore, suggest that the legal establishment of districts corresponds to creating an additional governance tier in the education system which, as discussed in Chapter 4, is not what present policy makers are disposed towards. A consequence of districts not being legal entities is that they are legally disabled from opening a bank account or raising funds, as they are not accountable to a public body.

In the case of the GDE, Chanee (Interview, 2004) elucidates that

the establishment of districts is an operational choice of the GDE in line with the PSA (see Chapter 4 for PSA stipulation on provincial organisation).

He adds that the strategic plan of the GDE, which is subject to adoption by the Gauteng

legislature, represents the ‘statutory format for the legal establishment of districts’ since it includes the organisational design of the GDE.

Clarity on district roles and functions, therefore, emanates from the GDE organogram – no other official document with legal authority explains the purpose of districts, the rationale for their establishment or their roles, powers and functions. The GDE organogram (GDE, 2005) spells out the purpose and function of the directorate, sub-directorates, sections and units of the district office, but not of the district as a whole. This limitation appears to represent the underlying reason why educationists have continued to call for greater clarity on the roles, powers and functions of districts. The current legal requirements appear to fall short of ensuring that provincial education departments provide a holistic vision of districts. However, there seem to be no legal obstacles to the GDE making available such a vision which, if presented, would certainly contribute towards reducing mystification about the legal status of districts, as well as their roles, functions and powers.

District officials thus do not acquire authority through legislation; instead they attain it through an administrative mechanism of delegation. Malherbe (Interview, 2004) points out that ‘delegation is a proven mechanism worldwide for effective administration; all countries use it’. The Employment of Educators Act (RSA, 1998) and the Public Service Act (RSA, 1994) both contain the basis on which delegations can occur. Section 36 (4) (a) of the Employment of Educators Act, for example, provides for the Head of Department to:

delegate to any person in the service of the provincial department of education any power conferred upon the Head of Department ... [and] ... authorise the said person to perform any duty assigned to the Head of Department

Part (II) (B) (1) of the Public Service Regulations (DPSA, 2001) notes that a Head of Department may

delegate the power to an employee or authorise an employee to perform a duty; and set conditions for the exercise of the power or performance of the duty.

Part (II) (B) (2) of the Regulations further stipulates that

an executing authority shall record a delegation or authorisation in writing and may incorporate it in an employment contract for a Head of department....

A noticeable feature of the system of delegation is that it occurs from post to post, not

from structure to structure or from post to structure. This implies that the Provincial Head Office as a structure cannot delegate functions to the district as a whole, nor can the Head of Department, as an individual, delegate functions to the district as an organisation. Instead, functions are transferred from a senior post-holder to a lower-ranking post-holder. Hence, in the case of districts, the district as an organisational unit is not delegated functions; rather it is (as is often the case) the District Director to whom functions are delegated.

Malherbe (Interview, 2004) points out that if delegations were transferred to structures instead of posts, it would result in ‘power floating around’, since no particular individual could be held responsible or accountable for a particular function. The system of delegation also limits the delegation of functions more than once in a chain (that is, double delegation). Hence, in the case of districts, the District Director may further delegate functions allocated to him or her to a lower-level official only if the conditions of the original delegation allow for it (Interviews, Boshoff, Malherbe, 2004).

The instrument of delegation has other facets, too. For instance, Part (II) (B) (3) of the Public Service Regulations stipulates that

the delegation of a power by an executing authority or head of department does not prevent her or him from exercising the power personally.

A legal reading of this clause by Boshoff (Interview, 2004) indicates that the system of delegation allows for *functions* to be delegated from senior officials to lower-ranking officials, but does not permit *responsibility* to be delegated. A system based on delegation of functions without concomitant responsibility perhaps explains why senior officials are often reluctant to delegate their functions to lower-level officials. The concept of delegation is also not designed to transfer authority on a permanent basis. Functions can be conferred or recalled as the delegating authority deems fit. Hence it is not uncommon to find provincial officials administering delegations at whim, as is the case in many provincial education departments (see Doe, 2003a). In the case of the GDE, too, delegations are, according to the District Director, notorious for often occurring ‘arbitrarily’ (Interview, District Director, 2004).

However, Mali (Interview, 2004) suggests otherwise. He points out that the PHO reviews its delegations annually, that delegations are often outcomes of BMT resolutions, and that

district directors are a part of the BMT. It is unclear, therefore, whether the perceived randomness of delegations on the part of the District Director reflects a dominant feature of the system of delegation in the GDE, or whether it reveals a perception based on his few experiences.

Apart from the erratic way in which delegations are perceived to occur, district officials also point to the absence of clear communication that clarifies which functions are transferred to district officials. The District Director, for instance, indicates that he has received no letters from the PHO indicating which powers have been awarded to him (Interview, District Director, 2004). He adds that he only comes across such matters during court cases. For example, the court had found that he had no legal authority to approve leave applications by teachers because the HOD had not delegated this function to him in writing. The District Director also points out that the current documentation on delegations is too generic, and not detailed enough for him to interpret the parameters within which delegations are conferred. IDS officials are also unaware of specific documentation that outlines the powers and functions of district directors (Interviews, IDS co-ordinator; IDSOs group 2, 2004). Several IDSOs complain that they are 'sometimes surprised' when they hear about the powers that are delegated to the District Director (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004). Chanee (Interview, 2004) confirms that delegations in the GDE occur predominantly via a circular, rather than a letter to the District Director. This method of delegating has created legal problems since 'circulars are not legally binding' (Interview, Prinsloo, 2004). Ironically, however, the GDE has been known to use the 'illegality' of its delegations to its advantage in court cases where it had to defend the actions of its officials (Interview, Prinsloo, 2004).⁷³

Several problems associated with the system of delegations in the GDE can be identified. Firstly, district officials (including the District Director) appear to be unclear about the legal powers and authority granted to the District Director. Secondly, the method of communication adopted by the GDE to confer delegated authority appears not to have the legal rigour required for delegations to stand up in court. And thirdly, district officials believe that certain functions that presently reside with the PHO should be transferred to the district (see Chapter 6 for details). Many of the aforementioned problems are not of a fundamental nature, and could, with adequate engagement, be attended to easily.

⁷³ In one case, when the approval for the appointment of an educator by a district official was challenged in court, the GDE argued in its defence that the official did not have the delegated authority to do so.

5.11 District-level governance

Although there are no governance structures with substantial authority at the district level of the system, the GDE has established two *advisory* governance structures in the system, namely the District Education and Training Councils (DETCs) and Local Education and Training Units (LETUs).

DETCs are established by the Gauteng MEC of education in each of the GDE's 12 districts in terms of the School Education Act (Gauteng) of 1995 (GPG, Chapter 5, Section 39 (1)). The Act facilitates both an advisory as well as an accountability role for DETCs. Hence, it permits the DETC to 'make recommendations to the District Director on any matter regarding education' (GPG, Chapter 5: Section 41 (1)), and mandates 'the District Director to report quarterly, in writing, on the state of education in his/her district to the District Council of his/her district (GPG, Chapter 5: Section 40).

The GDE 2003/04 Annual Report (GPG, 2004:68) indicates that, to date, DETCs have been established in 11 of the 12 districts of the GDE.

The GDE has established LETUs in terms of Regulations 4430 of 2001 (GDE, 2001). According to the GDE Annual Report of 2004/04, 'LETUs are groupings of education institutions in each education district, and fall under the jurisdiction of the DETC.'

Although SGBs form the core of each LETU, LETUs can be composed of the same constituencies in their local areas as the stakeholder groupings of the DETCs (GPG, 2004:12). LETUs are encouraged to make recommendations on any education-related matter to the DETC in their areas. In addition, they are expected to identify needs and determine priorities for education and training, as well as compile plans for meeting education and training needs for submission and approval to their respective DETCs (GPG, 2004:12).

According to GDE Regulation 4430 of 2001, a DETC should comprise representatives from the following interest groups: parents, learners, principals, teachers, SGBs, non-governmental organisations, community-based organisations (CBOs), Sector Education

and Training Authorities (SETAs) and business (GDE, 2001). LETUs, on the other hand, are comprised of one SGB representative from each school in its cluster. In the case of Tshwane South District, however, the district encourages two representatives from each SGB to participate in LETUs to promote balanced representation from parents and educators (Interview, Malopane⁷⁴ and Korkie,⁷⁵ 2005).

The Tshwane South DETU comprises one representative from each of its ten LETUs, as well as three representatives from other stakeholder bodies such as the Afrikaanse Taal en Kultuur Vereniging (ATKV), a religious organisation and FEDSAS. Of the ten LETU members, six are parent representatives and four are educators (Interview, Malopane and Korkie, 2005).

The district is concerned about the lack of interest demonstrated by NGOs in participating in its governance structures and, in 2002, publicly invited NGOs to apply for membership of LETUs and the DETC through the print media. However, the response was not particularly encouraging as only two organisations applied for membership to these governance structures (Interview, Malopane and Korkie, 2005).

DETC meetings focus mainly on policy matters, and often hold discussions to arrive at a common understanding of policy. In addition, the DETC has undertaken projects such as rendering support to child-headed families and providing resources. Moreover, the DETC has a direct line of communication with the Chief Executive Officer (CEO) of the GDE, via representation on the General Education and Training Council (GETC), which is a provincial-level advisory body to the CEO (Interview, Malopane and Korkie, 2005).

The GDE's attention to stakeholder participation at the district level has not been merely at the level of symbolic policy. Instead, it has attempted to promote stakeholder involvement in education by undertaking capacity-building workshops for DETC and LETU officials, as well as by making available assistant directors in district offices to provide administrative support to DETCs and LETUs (GPG, 2004:69). However, sceptics claim that of the 140 (GPG, 2004: 68) LETUs that have been established in the province, only about nine are really functional, and these, it is claimed, do not have much of an

⁷⁴ Rebecca Malopane provides administrative support from the district office to the Tshwane South DETC and its LETUs.

⁷⁵ Andre Korkie is a staff member of the Policy and Planning Unit of the district office.

effect on education matters (Interview, FEDSAS, 2004). IDS officials, too, are not particularly impressed with the effectiveness of DETCs; they point out that the Tshwane South District DETC ‘exists on paper only’ (interview, IDSOs group 2, 2004).

The NASGB is also concerned about the non-effectiveness of DETCs, but from another perspective. It argues that the DETC does not really reflect the aspirations of civil society since it is the district office that defines the agenda of DETC meetings. The NASGB (Interview, 2004) contends that this is so

because teachers and principals often snatch leadership positions of DETCs, and in most cases school principals are heading DETCs.

District officials acknowledge that most people elected to be on LETUs are either principals or teachers. However, they argue that the district does encourage participation of both parents and educators in LETUs by permitting two representatives from SGBs (a parent as well as an educator) to their respective LETUs (Interview, Malopane and Korkie, 2005). However, both FEDSAS and the NASGB maintain that DETCs and LETUs do not serve as effective links between schools, districts and the broader community. The NASGB, for example, argues for the development of stronger partnerships between schools and the community (Interview, NASGB, 2004), while FEDSAS contends that there should be closer relationships between districts and SGBs (Interview, FEDSAS, 2004).

DETCs and LETUs reflect a system of stakeholder participation where parents, school staff, learners and other parties represent their common and specific interests in a single body. As Fleisch (2002a) maintains, stakeholder democracy emphasises group interests (versus individual interests), and provides space for a variety of voices. It is based on the assumption that ‘societies are composed of competing groups, each with their own set of interests that need to be served in collective decisions; and its critical feature is that no single stakeholder can claim privileged status’ (Fleisch, 2002a:65). Though DETCs and LETUs, in theory, do not privilege the voice of any specific stakeholder, concerns about the dominance of educators in these structures have emerged from several sources, as is demonstrated above.

This study does not aim to arrive at any firm conclusions about the effectiveness and value-addedness of district governance structures in education matters, as more focused

and in-depth research is required for this purpose. However, the study can conclude that despite attempts by the GDE and Tshwane South District to strengthen district-level governance, and despite the projects undertaken by the Tshwane South DETC to support schools, strong perceptions exist that DETCs and LETUs do not fulfil their aim of broadening stakeholder participation in education matters; nor are they perceived as effective linkages between schools and the broader community.

5.12 Summary of findings

To refer to *the* district office in this case study is actually a misnomer, because in reality Tshwane South District comprises two offices, set apart by about five kilometres of urban spread. The two offices have resulted in disjointed service delivery to schools, exasperation and frustration among staff, and a silo mentality of functioning on the part of district officials. Although plans to integrate the two offices are afoot, it is not yet certain when this is expected to occur. Hence the shadow of insecurity continues to plague the district office, and undermines its ability to function effectively.

A striking feature of the story of Tshwane South District is the growth it has experienced since its inception. From its humble beginnings in 1994, staffed with four White officials in a former Transvaal Education Department (TED) building in central Pretoria, it has, in the space of ten years, grown to a fully-fledged district office with a racially mixed staff complement of about 240, servicing about 224 public schools. The growth in the size of the district reflects, to an extent, the increasing importance attached to districts by the GDE. Chapter 7 reveals that the attention paid to districts by the GDE is strongly associated with the GDE's preoccupation with policy compliance by schools.

The growth of the district, has been accompanied by changes in the nature of the relationship between schools and the district office (see Chapter 7 for further details). The initial resistance and aggression experienced by district officials from schools (particularly from former HOA and HOD schools) has shifted over the years. District officials now perceive schools to be more loyal to and co-operative with the district office, and are able to undertake their duties without fear of rebuff from schools.

Restructuring has undoubtedly been a significant hallmark of the district, and has

predictably resulted in changes to the nature of the work of the district office. For example, the main office was relocated once already, and is expected to be re-located again. Functions have moved vertically and horizontally, and in the case of the latter, first added on (when regions were dissolved), then removed (when the GSSC was established). The creation of the GSSC by the Premier's office separated major administrative functions from the professional functions of the district office, in contradiction to the rationale for the GDE dissolving regions in the first place. District boundaries have changed, and the number of schools the office has to service has increased. New policies churned out by the Department of Education and the Provincial Head Office lend an added dimension to the constant changes experienced by the district office. However, the constant restructuring efforts of the GDE have been perceived as being not accompanied by improvement in the quality of services to schools (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). This correlates with Elmore's (1993a) findings that restructuring seldom touches the 'technical core' – that is, the activities related to teaching and learning – in schools.

The top-heavy and bottom-light structure of the GDE undermines the effective delivery of services to schools. It flies in the face of international thinking, which advocates that education organisations should be top-light and bottom-heavy for adequate services to be provided to schools (De Grauwe & Varghese, 2000:19). Although the GDE has increased the number of curriculum staff in districts in preparation for the introduction of the new FET curriculum (telephonic conversation, CDS co-ordinator, 15 August 2005), the functions carried at the district level remain overloaded relative to those at the provincial level.

The district-provincial accountability system is characterised by a disjuncture between bureaucratic and programmatic accountability. In theory, district officials are accountable to the District Director; however, in practice there exist 'dotted' lines of accountability between district office and their counterparts at the PHO. Hence the district office often functions within a dual system of accountability, despite attempts by the GDE to remedy the situation. The root of this problem lies with the configuration of the budgeting system, which is programme-based, rather than organisationally defined. Thus, in relation to districts, there is no district budget *per se*. Instead, the operational budget of districts reflects an aggregate of programme budgets, for which PHO officials are held

accountable.

An additional feature of the district accountability system is that it focuses on individual accountability rather than institutional accountability. A significant outcome thereof is that district accountability is upwards, rather than downwards. Hence districts remain accountable to the PHO rather than schools, which are the expected beneficiaries of their services.

Although district accountability is, in the main, vertically upwards, there does exist a mode of lateral accountability to advisory governance structures. Districts are expected to be accountable to the DETCs and LETUs (as discussed earlier) through regular reporting mechanisms and by considering recommendations made to it by the DETCs and LETUs. However, district accountability to its governance structures is not at the level where it surpasses or replaces its accountability to the PHO. The PHO remains the central figure of accountability for the district office.

Adequate resources have not accompanied the dramatic growth of the district office. And as Prawda (1992) advises (see Chapter 2), adequate human, physical and financial resources are required for decentralisation to be implemented effectively in systems. In Tshwane South District, low budgets and the lack of much-needed office equipment undermine the ability of district officials to deliver education services to schools. Fortunately for the district office, over 80% of the schools in the district have Section 21 status in terms of the South African Schools Act (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). This lessens the administrative burden on districts, as Section 21 schools manage their own budgets and account payments. However, the deficiency of staff in several key areas of education further dents their capacity for effective education service delivery.

In general, though, Tshwane South District is blessed with a reasonable staff complement when compared to other districts in other provinces in the country (DoE, 2003a). Despite this, the numbers remain insufficient to meet the demands of the support, policy and management roles expected of the district office. In addition, the low level of experience and expertise among district staff is disconcerting for many schools. For example, IDSOs are perceived as possessing poor levels of professional expertise, are said to lack practical experience of the post-1994 school governance and management environment, and are

therefore inhibited in their capacity to support schools (see also Chapter 7 which focuses on relationships between schools and the district office).

The ignorance on the part of district officials regarding the powers delegated to the District Director, and the arbitrary manner in which the GDE confers delegations to district directors, also weighs heavily on the competence of the district office. Furthermore, administrative and other demands of the PHO distract the district office from its core functions. Fleisch (2002a:196), in his study of the GDE, also found that PHO implementation plans remain highly prescriptive despite serious efforts by the GDE to devolve responsibilities to districts.

One of the important outcomes of this study is the clarity it provides regarding the legal status of districts. Much of the South African literature on districts has focused on the need for the legal status of districts to be defined clearly, and indeed for districts to be legislated for (Godden & Maurice, 2000; Roberts, 2001). Legal experts contend, however, that the establishment of districts is an act of administration rather than one of legislation. Provincial officials (Interview, Chanee, 2004) also point out that the establishment of districts is an operational choice of provincial government departments in line with the PSA (DPSA, 2001), rather than lying in the ambit of national government. Legal experts note that should districts be legislated for, it would be tantamount to creating an additional layer of education governance in the system, which, as has been discussed in Chapters 2 and 3, adds a new dimension to this debate, a matter discussed further in Chapter 8.

With respect to district-level governance, the GDE has engaged in serious attempts to promote the participation of local communities in education matters. It has promulgated legislation to this effect, and has undertaken capacity-building programmes for those involved in local governance structures, namely the DETCs and LETUs. However, the role of district-level governance structures is circumscribed, as they serve only as advisory bodies to the district office, and do not represent significant centres of authority.

5.13 Conclusion

This chapter confirms that education districts in South Africa are deconcentrated units of

provincial education departments, rather than highly devolved structures of the education system. Education districts reflect a form of administration decentralisation rather than a form of political decentralisation (see reference to Samoff's typology of decentralisation in Chapter 2).

Three key features of the district system provide evidence for this conclusion. Firstly, there is no fiscal decentralisation to the district level of the system. That is to say, districts do not manage or control their own budgets, nor are they empowered to raise their own funds. Secondly, districts are primarily accountable to the PHO, rather than to local-level governance structures. Although governance structures in the form of LETUs and DETCs do exist at the district level in Gauteng, they by no means represent authorities to whom districts are principally accountable. These are, in the main, merely advisory bodies to the district rather than structures with significant powers. Thirdly, districts obtain their authority through an administrative mechanism of delegation rather than through legislation. This means that district powers and functions can (technically) be granted and/or withdrawn at whim by the PHO. Provincial education departments are, for example, not compelled to seek permission from a legislative body, nor are they expected to engage in political processes when determining the powers and functions to be granted to districts. These three features of South African districts suggest that in the high-to-low continuum of decentralisation, districts feature at the lower end.

In particular, districts reflect what Cheema and Rondenelli, 1983:18) refer to as a form of 'integrated administration', since they operate as an integrated unit. For instance, district officials operate (at least in theory) under the direct supervision of the District Director rather than under PHO staff, and district staff do not work independently of each other. Instead, districts are expected to develop district plans and programmes within the ambit of school-level and provincial-level planning processes.

Hence, in conferring a structural definition to districts, this chapter concludes that education districts are integrated, deconcentrated units of provincial education departments. As deconcentrated units of PHOs, districts serve as a crucial link between schools and the Department of Education.

The next chapter uses the Tshwane South District case study to examine how districts

play out their roles in practice. It interrogates the programmes and activities of the district office with a view to unravelling its relationship with schools on the one hand and the PHO on the other.

Chapter 6

EXPLORING DISTRICT PROGRAMMES AND ACTIVITIES: WHAT DISTRICTS ACTUALLY DO

6.1 Introduction

This chapter is a continuation of the story of Tshwane South District. While the previous chapter explored the evolutionary development of the district office, as well as its key 'pillars of performance' such as district resources, district capacity, authority to act and support structures, this chapter focuses on the actual programmes and activities of its officials. It does so in line with the research question that asks how provincial education departments assign meanings to districts, and goes to the heart of how district meanings are assigned in practice.

Discrepancies between what organisations actually do, what they are supposed to do, and what they say they do, are not uncommon (Prawda, 1992). Hence by investigating what district officials actually do, through both their own voices and those of schools, as well as through my personal observations of district activity, this chapter illuminates how meanings are ascribed to districts in everyday practice.

This chapter investigates district office programmes and activities in two ways. Firstly, it focuses on key school-district interactive spaces with a view to revealing the form and nature of district functions. By school-district interactive spaces, I refer to the nature, degree and forms of exchange and interaction that take place between district officials and school-based educators such as teachers and principals. Secondly, this chapter describes district activities and practices by drawing on the voices of district officials. This chapter has chosen to depict the activities of those groups of officials in the district

office that interact most with schools, since district engagement with schools is central to its roles and functions (see Chapter 7). The study has found that schools interact mainly with officials from the IDS, CDS, Examinations and ESS Units in the district. To a lesser but not insignificant extent, schools often engage with units involved in staffing and labour relations matters. The level of school autonomy, in terms of whether they are classified as Section 20 or 21 schools, also impacts upon the degree and scope of the relationship between schools and the district office (see reference to ‘self-managing’ schools in chapter 2), as Section 20 schools engage more with the administrative division of the district office than Section 21 schools.

6.2 School-district interactive spaces

6.2.1 Overview

The exchange between schools and the district office occurs in a number of different ways: through circulars and memos emanating from the district office, via regular visits to schools by IDS officials and less frequent school visits by CDS and ESS officials, by means of telephonic communication, and through personal visits by principals to the district office for, in the main, administrative matters. These school-district interactions occur predominantly through the initiative of districts and, to a smaller extent, of schools. Schools also meet with or interact with district officials in the course of training and development workshops organised by the district or the Provincial Head Office, or during cluster meetings of principals and teachers. Periodically, schools have short bursts of intense contact with the Examinations Unit to prepare and carry out the matriculation examinations and Grade 9 common assessment tasks. There exists, therefore, a district office *presence* in schools – sometimes physical and often abstract, but a presence nonetheless. In schools, the district presence is felt more by principals than by teachers, as will be demonstrated below.

This part of the chapter provides a ‘thick’ description of the ways in which schools experience the district office. It explores how schools experience visits by IDS, CDS and ESS officials, their perceptions of capacity-building programmes facilitated by district officials, their experiences of clusters which are aimed at promoting networking between schools, and how memos and circulars from the district office influence their own

activities and programmes.

6.2.2 School visits

Internationally, the number of visits made to schools by district officials is often used as a key measure of evaluating district performance (Grauwe & Varghese, 2000:18) and, for the purposes of this study, central to understanding the nature of the interactive space between schools and districts. This section probes the frequency of school visits by district officials, but does not limit itself to figures. It also explores the quality of these visits to obtain a deeper insight into school-district interactions.

Schools are visited most regularly by IDS officials, while CDS and ESS officials visit schools less frequently. The frequency of IDSO visits to schools varies (between once a month and once per term), but officials claim that there is an unwritten policy that IDSOs should visit their allocated schools at least once a month (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). Certainly the IDS co-ordinator expects that of them (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). In fact, some IDSOs claim that they spend 70% of their time visiting schools (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). This translates to some principals being visited by their IDSOs once a month (Interview, principals 1, 2 and 9, 2004), while others see them every two weeks (Interview, principals 4 and 6, 2004), and yet others are visited twice a quarter (Interview, principal 5, 2005).

IDSOs visit schools for various reasons: to check if the school has any problems (Interviews, principals 2 and 6, 2004), provide information, guidance or advice (Interviews, principals 1 and 6, 2004), solve problems at the school (Interview, principal 3, 2004) and monitor what is going on at the school (Interview, principals 2 and 3, 2004). Monitoring is a central element of IDSO visits as they often go to schools to look at timetables, inspect the degree of readiness of a school at the beginning of the year, monitor SGB elections and monitor matriculation examinations (Interview, principal 3, 2004). However, one principal does not feel that IDSO visits are designed for 'checking', but merely to 'discuss what is going on' (Interview, principal 5, 2004), while another indicates that

we receive lots of support from the IDSO. Each time a request is made, it is followed up (Interview, principal 2, 2004),

Yet another principal points out that

whenever we have problems we phone the IDSO for support and more clarity. The IDSO provides information on how to go about doing things (Interview, principal 2004).

The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) explains that IDS school visits are geared at supporting schools (on matters of learner discipline, for example), monitoring schools to ensure that they are following the right processes, and checking up on teacher and learner absenteeism levels. IDS officials indicate that they visit schools to check if schools adhere to regulations, to monitor matriculation examinations, to identify excess teachers in terms of the policy on post provisioning, for monitoring SGB and Representative Council of Learners (RCL) elections and to mediate conflicts (Interview, IDS groups 2 and 3, 2004). They also note, somewhat cynically, that they often go to schools merely to collect questionnaires and take them back, and argue that they are not doing what they should be doing (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

Depending on the nature of the visit, IDS officials spend between an hour and a whole school day at the school. On occasion, IDSOs visit schools in the evenings and over weekends to attend SGB meetings (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). Often, IDSOs are invited by schools to present motivational talks to parents and learners (Interview, principal 9, 2004). At the time of this research, there was a strike by teacher unions over salaries and other conditions of service. IDSOs had a central role to play in identifying teachers that were on strike, and determining which schools had to close for the day. According to IDSOs, they had to visit 15 schools each before 13h00 on the day of the strike (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004).

While some principals express satisfaction with the support they receive from IDSOs, others are not particularly enamoured of them. One principal, for example, complains that learners in a class were without a teacher for three weeks, and that the problem was only solved through the intervention of the District Director (Interview, principal 3, 2004), while another despairs that the

IDS does not help us at all when we need certain things (Interview, principal 8, 2004).

On a another matter related to conflict between the principal and the SGB, the same principal claims that she ‘can’t really say that the IDS have given their support’, but ‘recommends the CDS’. She argues that when the IDSO visits her school, he checks if lessons are taking place, checks if all policies are in place and will only

come back when delivering a letter or coming to say something urgent. And that's it. He will come next term to find out those things that were not ready the previous time he had come (Interview, principal 8, 2004).

Another principal points to the disinterest demonstrated by some IDSOs in the problems of schools. He remarks that

the IDSO visits us once a month. It is only a courtesy visit. He does not know what is happening at the school (Interview, principal 9, 2004).

And yet another principal (Interview, principal 2, 2004) contends that there is no uniformity and consistency with which IDSOs help schools in interpreting policy; that the varying ways in which IDSOs guide schools on policy creates tensions between schools and community, and the principal and teachers.⁷⁶ The principal argues that because schools are not islands within a community, the district office should facilitate a common application of policy within a particular area. In contrast, another principal (Interview, principal 4, 2004) argues that

IDSOs provide adequate support on the policy side, but not on the management side of things.

My observation during a school visit (school 1) undertaken by an IDSO⁷⁷ provides interesting insight into the school-district interactive space. In the school I visited, I found that the IDSO was concerned primarily with transmitting the correct policy message to the school. However, she simultaneously lent a sympathetic ear to the problems raised by the school. The principal and teachers were provided with an opportunity to air their grievances, while the IDSO, patiently and authoritatively, explained GDE policy positions on the matters raised by the school. The visit was in essence a two-hour meeting between the IDSO, the principal and four teachers.

Both sides had separate issues to discuss, all of which were dealt with relatively smoothly by the IDSO, despite their sensitivities and complexities. The purpose of the IDSO visit was to draw the attention of the school to several policy matters, to which the school was expected to adhere.⁷⁸ The school, on the other hand, used the opportunity to raise

⁷⁶ Examples of such inconsistencies include the following: permission to allow learners to leave school early during exam times, dismissal times of learners, and school holidays for religious observances.

⁷⁷ I accompanied one IDSO to visit three schools on 22 February 2005. The visits were pre-arranged by the IDSO with the schools concerned.

⁷⁸ Policy issues raised by the IDSO included the following: the need for schools to ensure that all costs incurred by learners (including learning support materials, tours and excursions) should be included in school fees, even if it resulted in an increase in fees; checking if SGBs included parents who did not have children at school; and checking if the school financial statement had gone to the auditors.

problems they had with several GDE policies.⁷⁹ The IDSO's role during this visit was to provide policy advice, defend GDE policy, promote adherence to policy, encourage schools to prepare for change and soften the effect of the GDE policy message. The IDSO circumvented the anger of teachers against the GDE for not preparing them adequately to implement the new FET curriculum in 2006 by pointing out that the district office does not develop policy, but only supports its implementation.

My observation concluded that the IDSO's role as harbinger of not so pleasant 'messages' from the GDE and as empathiser with the problems faced by the school called upon all her skills as negotiator, pacifier, facilitator, advisor and change agent. Most IDSOs are placed in similar invidious positions, and have to navigate their way through the labyrinth of roles expected of them in their interaction with schools. Interesting to observe in this particular visit though, was the frankness of debate and discussion between school staff and the IDSO. Here there was no evidence of repression of debate nor an overt application of authority on the part of the IDSO. And I observed a similar picture in the other two schools I visited with the IDSO.

This study concludes that principals experience IDSO school visits in varying ways. Some view such visits as avenues of support, while others look upon IDSO visits to schools as a means of checking what is going on at school. From an outsider perspective, IDSO school visits generally have multiple purposes including transmitting policy messages, explaining the policy context and softening the effects of policy, as well as identifying problems experienced by schools and taking them up where possible. In most instances, IDSOs cannot solve school problems, because these are often linked to major policy issues of the GDE and the Department of Education, or related to school budgets and staffing requirements. In the case of the latter, the IDSO only intervenes if the problem is administrative in nature. Schools that recognise the limits and possibilities within which IDSOs operate are able to maximise the support role that IDSOs can play, while those that do not, experience frustration with what they perceive as limited support by IDSOs.

School experiences of IDSOs also seem to be dependent on the personality, commitment, experience and competence of IDSOs. Certainly in the case of the IDSO school visits that

⁷⁹ Schools expressed concern about the introduction of the new FET curriculum and the lack of staff to implement the new curriculum.

I observed, the rough edges of the policy messages carried by the IDSO were smoothed over by the IDSO's approach, which was empathetic to the school's context, and was marked by a tolerance of debate and an attitude of constructive engagement. These IDSO attributes were crucial in eliciting the trust of schools and minimising negativity towards the IDSO, district and GDE in general.

CDS officials do not visit schools as frequently as IDSOs. This is understandable since CDS officials, as subject, learning area or phase specialists, have a far larger number of schools to visit than their counterparts in the IDS Unit. According to one principal (Interview, principal 6, 2004), CDS officials informed a meeting of principals that though they wished to visit schools at least once per term they were unable to do so because they had too many schools to cover. Hence teachers and principals see CDS officials at their schools very irregularly, or even rarely. One principal (Interview, principal 10, 2004) indicated that her school was only visited twice by CDS officials since 1994, while a teacher (Interview, teacher 5, 2004) noted that a CDS official had visited the HOD at her school two years ago. Some principals reported, though, that CDS officials generally visit their schools at least once per term (Interview, principals 5 and 6, 2004). Individual teachers, however, may be lucky to see a CDS official once in a year at their school (Interview, teachers 3, 5 and 6, 2004).

CDS officials claim that, as a rule, they generally spend three days of their working week on school visits. However, this does not appear to translate into the experiences of individual teachers simply because the CDS to teacher ratio is far too low for effective interaction between CDS officials and individual teachers (see Chapter 5). CDS visits to schools are prompted by their assessment of which schools require support (Interview, CDS group, 2004), and in some instances by schools themselves (Interview, principal 10, 2004).⁸⁰ One principal (Interview, principal 2, 2004) observed that CDS officials visit schools only when invited to do so by teachers, but that teachers often do not take up the open invitation offered CDS officials since they believe that 'there is no need for class visits'. An important principle of CDS school visits is that schools are informed in advance (in writing) about the impending visit, accompanied by information about which subject/phases/learning area will be dealt with. One principal commented that this is 'comforting' since teachers do not feel threatened (Interview, principal 8, 2005). This

⁸⁰ In this instance, the CDS school visit was prompted in response to a parental complaint about a teacher

approach marks a distinctive shift from the pre-1994 era, when inspectors or subject advisors used to swoop on schools unannounced to inspect the work of teachers.

The nature of CDS school visits demonstrates a typical pattern. CDS officials visit a school (often in groups, on a pre-arranged basis as indicated above), engage in a brief courtesy meeting with the principal, visit teachers in their classrooms, observe their lessons, check learners' books and portfolios, check teachers' files, write a report with recommendations for improvement, and present this to teachers as well as the principal (Interviews, principals 5 and 8, teachers 1, 3, 4 and 6, 2004). My observations of a school visit by a team of CDS and ESS officials confirm this.⁸¹ However, two schools reported that district officials were not allowed to observe classroom lessons because teacher unions did not agree to the policy of classroom visits (Interviews, principal 7, teacher 5, 2005). CDS officials, though, indicate that they generally experience no problems in accessing classrooms to observe lessons (Interview, CDS group, 2004). It is probable that some schools have continued to draw on history to refuse access to classrooms by district officials. During the 1980s many schools adopted an aggressive stance against circuit officials and virtually threw them out of schools (see Chapter 3). However, after 1994 no formal agreement regarding a moratorium on classroom visits by supervisors has been signed at the Education Labour Relations Council between teacher unions and the Department of Education (Telephonic interview, Govender, 4 August 2005).

Teachers offer contrasting accounts of their experiences with school visits by CDS officials. One teacher, for example, points out that

in the beginning we felt that they were like inspectors, but we learned that they were here to help, not criticise. Our fear is no longer there; we feel that people are there to help us (Interview, teacher 3, 2004).

Certainly at the school visit that I was kindly allowed to observe, CDS officials were at pains to point out to teachers that their visit was aimed at development and not inspection. Nevertheless, not all teachers seem to respond positively to the proclaimed development efforts of CDS officials. One teacher argues that

district officials should not only come to schools to check if our files are up to date; they should ask teachers what support they require (Interview, teachers⁸² 6,

⁸¹ I accompanied a team of six Foundation Phase CDS officials and two ESS officials on a school visit on 7 February 2005.

⁸² The interview with 'teachers' 6 was a joint interview held with two teachers. It was the only joint interview held with teachers in this study (see details in Chapter 1). For the purposes of reference, it is considered as one interview, as the responses of the two teachers have not been disaggregated.

2004).

Another teacher (Interview, teacher 7, 2004) claims that

the CDS officials calm us down more than teach us. They only want to know if we are on the right track.

An additional problem is one inherited from the apartheid era. A teacher (Interview, teachers 6, 2004) points out that

teachers are afraid to ask for support from CDS officials because they are afraid of being seen as incompetent, and of being found with faults.

This is understandable, given that the majority of South African teachers have had very demoralising experiences with the pre-1994 inspectorial system, and little experience with constructive forms of appraisal. Another teacher, however, expressed a warm reaction towards CDS school visits. She pointed out that

their guidance helps a lot. We have learned about portfolios. Previously we used to follow the traditional lesson plan. Now there is a new formula for lesson plans and it is not confusing for learners. Their planning is good. It is helpful to schools (Interview, teacher 5, 2004).

Interesting to note from this response is that the teacher was commenting on the *policy* support provided to teachers, not support based on needs expressed by the teacher. As one principal observed,

it is better if schools identify needs, and district officials work on the needs of schools (Interview, principal 8, 2005).

But it is not only CDS officials that are concerned primarily with policy issues. Teachers, too, are apprehensive about being 'on the right track', and in one school they requested CDS officials to visit their school to 'check if policy is complied with' (Interview, principal 5, 2004). Another school contacts CDS officials telephonically 'all the time' to check if it is implementing the curriculum correctly (Interview, principal 8, 2004).

Several teachers, however, are less animated about contacting CDS officials or about the nature of support provided by CDS officials. They express concern about the policy compliance role of CDS officials, and point to the need for them to be more responsive to the needs of teachers rather than merely ensuring that they are on the right track. There is concern, too, about the approach adopted by some CDS officials on their school visits.

One teacher (Interview, teacher 4, 2004) laments that

the CDS do not really support teachers. Although they said that they are coming

to help teachers, they did not really advise and assist us in any way. They only came once, and it felt like an inspection. If they came more often, it would be better.

Certainly, the school visit by CDS officials that I was privy to observing came across more as a supervisory visit rather than a developmental one, despite the professed intention of support on the part of the district officials. In that instance, CDS officials observed classroom lessons, examined teachers' and learners' files and books, and met with the relevant staff thereafter to point out the problems they found. The approach adopted by CDS officials frequently lurched from being developmental on the one hand, to being judgemental on the other. In their *language* CDS officials came across as being supportive, but in their actual *practice*, they lapsed into a traditional inspectoral role. The image I went away with from this school visit was of HODs scurrying around frantically to search for their files and books, and of CDS officials poring over these to check if what HODs were doing was in line with what was expected of them. Despite constant verbal assurances of the developmental nature of their visit, CDS officials (unfortunately, I may add, because it certainly did not appear to be their intention) fell into the trap of constructing their school visit into a 'fault-finding' mission. In the visit that I observed, CDS officials were unable to walk the tightrope of support and pressure expected of them, and, judging from the comments made by teachers (see above), they seemed to experience difficulty in playing the role of both adjudicator and mentor. CDS officials themselves recognise (perhaps unconsciously) the choice they made in privileging the route of pressure over support in this particular school visit. They complain that

we have provided so much of support and so many resources for so many years now; we are tired of being nice and of babysitting. We feel that teachers are manipulative because they only talk about barriers (Informal discussion, CDS officials, 2004).

Hence, while CDS officials are sympathetic to the resource constraints facing teachers, they believe that they should adopt a 'harsher' approach in future since teachers are 'too spoilt'.

Though there is a common pattern to the nature of CDS visits to schools, the data suggests that schools themselves experience these in different ways. While some schools view these as support visits and regard them warmly, others have different expectations, and are critical of the monitoring orientation of the visits. However, schools in general do not reject the idea of CDS intervention in their work, and look forward to greater contact

with CDS officials – in some cases, though, on terms that are different to those that characterise the present. Clearly, limited evidence of the positive impact of their interventions has left CDS officials feeling frustrated. Hence they tend to grasp pressure levers to bring about changes in teacher practice that they view as being important, rather than continue in the vein of friendly support that they claim they have been offering schools to date.

School responses to visits by officials from the ESS Unit in the district office are also divergent. Some schools present positive feedback on their interaction with ESS officials, while others express much dissatisfaction with the services they receive from ESS officials. Principals also tend not to know too much about the work of ESS officials, since interaction between schools and the ESS Unit (which appears to be limited) occurs largely through school-based support teams (Interview, principals 1, 4 and 6, 2004). ESS officials have assisted some schools in identifying learners with special needs and facilitating their placement in special schools (Interviews, principals 7 and 9, teachers 6, 2004). One principal praised the efficiency of ESS officials by pointing out that

ESS officials were very helpful; they went out of their way to help our school. The placement of learners in special schools was done in one week (Interview, principal 7, 2004).

Some teachers expressed gratitude about the support provided by ESS officials in guiding them how to help learners with special problems (Interview, teacher 3, 2004). However, many principals are unhappy with ESS services and complain that

if we have a problem, ESS officials are unable to help us; we solve most problems ourselves (Interview, principal 3, 2004),

and argue that

ESS is badly run because its staff do not know the culture of learners; they do not come to school and the school does not call them (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

There appears to be little consensus among schools about the availability and value of ESS services. This could be attributed to the low number of ESS staff in the district office in relation to the number of schools they have to service (see Chapter 5).

6.2.3 Clusters

The idea of clustering schools together for promoting greater interaction and networking

among educators is not new internationally (Dittmar *et al.*, 2002),⁸³ and is also a phenomenon in the GDE. According to the CDS co-ordinator, the idea of clustering teachers emerged in 1998, when outcomes-based education was first introduced to schools. OBE envisaged teachers as curriculum developers, hence the GDE recognised a need for teachers to adopt a ‘critical friend’ (Telephonic interview, CDS co-ordinator, 3 August 2005). The system of clustering Grades 1 to 9 teachers was introduced formally in 2001. Currently, clusters have been established for all teachers, including those from Grades 10 to 12.

Schools in GDE districts are clustered in different ways for different purposes. IDSO clusters correspond to the schools that they are regularly responsible for, while CDS officials cluster schools according to school phases or their geographical location.

IDS clusters serve as quarterly meeting points for principals and are convened and chaired by the school IDSO (Interview, principals 1 and 7, 2004). Cluster meetings of principals are generally used to discuss matters that are of common concern to principals, as well as policy and staffing issues. Some principals find them useful as they help to clarify policy (Interviews, principal 7, CDS co-ordinators, 2004). However, one principal contends that cluster meetings are helpful only for certain kinds of schools as they do not benefit all principals. He proposes that it would be more beneficial if schools were grouped according to their interests and contexts (for example, parallel medium and multicultural schools), rather than geographical location (Interview, principal 4, 2004). On the other hand, as the CDS co-ordinators (interview, 2004) point out, an advantage of the present system of clustering is that ‘it helps to break the apartheid barrier’, since teachers are ‘forced’ to work together across historically racial barriers.

The district office is clearly in an unenviable position regarding the selection of criteria for the demarcation of clusters as it necessitates trading off geographical and efficiency factors with deracialisation issues. The CDS co-ordinator recalls that initially there was much resentment by teachers against the way in which clusters were demarcated. This, she concludes, occurred for two reasons. Firstly, clustering resulted in teachers having to travel far away from their schools for cluster meetings, this at high cost to the teacher in

⁸³ Dittmar *et al.* (2002: 1) observe that school clusters have come into focus in many countries in recent years. They note that clusters serve two main purposes in these countries: firstly, to improve teaching by sharing resources, experience and expertise among teachers, and secondly, to facilitate administration and to pool the resources of several small schools.

terms of time and money. Secondly, the CDS co-ordinator claims that teachers from the different racial groups did not totally benefit from being together as they had very different problems and functioned at different 'levels' (Telephonic interview, CDS co-ordinator: 3 August 2005). Clearly, cluster meetings need to fulfil both requirements, promoting cross-racial and cross-cultural interaction, as well as ensuring that the special interests and needs of schools are adequately focused upon. A careful balancing act is necessary to ensure that both criteria are met.

CDS clusters operate differently to IDS clusters. They are grouped differently, and are convened by cluster leaders who are teachers elected by the cluster, rather than by CDS officials. In fact, CDS officials rarely attend teacher cluster meetings; their role is limited largely to facilitating the organisation of cluster meetings by arranging venues and informing teachers of such meetings through district memos (Interviews, teachers 1 and 6, 2004). CDS clusters, which are made up of teachers from about 10 to 14 schools (Interview, teacher 4, 2004) meet quarterly (Interview, teachers 2 and 5, 2004), or sometimes even once a month (Interview, teacher 4, 2004).

A significant activity of cluster meetings is quality assurance and standardisation. This occurs largely through the exchange and moderation of learner portfolios among teachers, and the organisation of common tests and examinations for the cluster or district by CDS officials. In addition, cluster meetings discuss curriculum policy issues such as GDE requirements for assessment and lesson preparation. As one teacher indicated

we talk about question papers for trial exams, and we get volunteers to set papers. We also talk about policy issues – what needs to be done for each subject, how many tests should be written, how many projects should be given, etc (Interview, teacher 4, 2004).

Initially, moderation of portfolios was geared only at Grade 9 learners, largely in preparation for the Grade 9 exit examination. However, it is currently slowly extending to other grades as well (Interview, teacher 5, 2004). A teacher explained that

each teacher brings three samples of learner portfolios; these are exchanged between teachers in the cluster, checked and moderated. A moderation form is completed by each teacher, signed and submitted to the district office, where the moderation is finalised (Interview, teacher 5, 2004).

Some teachers are cynical about the role of clusters in this form of quality assurance. One teacher argues that

district officials are stepping back; clusters are a new cushion for districts

(Interview, teachers 6, 2004),

while another contends that

clusters are a short route for district officials; it is a big fake (Interview, teacher 7, 2004).

Clearly there appears to be disquiet in some quarters about teachers taking over a function which is believed to be that of district officials. However, teachers also report other kinds of activities organised by clusters. For example, some clusters arrange exchange visits between schools by teachers, and one teacher reported her one-week visit to a former Model C school as 'very good' (Interview, teacher 1, 2004). The effectiveness of clusters appears to reside significantly in the leadership qualities and abilities of cluster leaders.

One teacher pointed out that

in the first two years we got no help from the cluster – it was only about policy and assessment. This year we have a new cluster leader – we go through learner and teacher portfolios. We find it beneficial because it standardises marking procedures (Interview, teacher 5, 2004).

Teacher attitudes towards clusters vary. Most teachers find clusters beneficial and rewarding because they can share their workload and make their work easier, while others are less enthusiastic about them. One teacher stated that

clusters are good; we are able to communicate with other teachers (Interview, teacher 1, 2004),

while others confirm that

clusters are very helpful; we learn from one another and share ideas about teaching (Interview, teachers 3 and 5, 2004);

and yet another claims that clusters

provide information and make the work easier because we share the workload (Interview, teachers 6, 2004).

However, one teacher is not quite so taken up with clusters. He argues that at cluster meetings,

teachers complain about the volume of work, and there is never consensus about portfolios, nor is there any clarity from district officials. After cluster meetings we feel downhearted because there are ten more things to be done. Each CDS official wants the best in his/her learning area and it is frustrating for us (Interview, teacher 7, 2004).

The call for standardised curriculum requirements across different learning areas appears to be a valid one, as many teachers teach more than one learning area (sometimes three or

four), and of necessity are not specialised in all of them.

A problem raised by one principal about cluster meetings is that the messages teachers carry from these meetings sometimes clash with school policy. She cites the example of her school policy which promotes the regular testing and examinations in all grades, but which cluster meetings do not attach much importance to. This results in conflict at the school level, as the principal believes that the school policy should be adhered to, rather than decisions made at cluster meetings (Interview, principal 2, 2004).

Although clusters are intended to serve as a space for teacher networking and peer support, in the GDE curriculum clusters represent a form of decentralisation within the district. They facilitate the delegation of quality assurance and standardisation functions from CDS officials to teachers. While some regard this as an additional burden for teachers, many teachers (with some exceptions) appear to benefit from these tasks and, certainly from the sample of teachers interviewed, most of them appear to embrace what clusters offer them. Currently, there is little evidence of much resistance or resentment on the part of teachers towards clusters. However, it is possible that teachers may in the future come to regard clusters as instruments of district control rather than as mechanisms for teacher development. This scenario is more likely if there is weak cluster leadership and if the moderation and policy focus of clusters predominate over other activities (such as the joint development of common assessment tasks and the sharing of teaching skills) from which teachers seem to be benefiting. As De Grauwe and Varghese (2000:18) warn, experience in other countries has demonstrated that it is easy for the cluster system to develop into a new administrative layer, through the demands of higher-level authorities.

6.2.4 Communication between schools and the district office

Official communication between the district office and schools occurs via PHO circulars and district memos. The system of official communication appears to be working well, as schools do not complain about not receiving circulars or memos, though they are sometimes critical about the late notification of meetings. Schools are expected to collect circulars and memos at a pre-arranged nodal point every Wednesday. Principals look forward to Wednesdays, as district directives ‘allow schools to programme their activity for the week’ (Interview, principal 2, 2004), and also provide an opportunity for principals within a particular locality to ‘get together on an ad-hoc basis’ to exchange

news and discuss developments at their schools (Interview, principal 7, 2004).

On average, schools receive between 10 and 14 circulars and district memos in a week. For example, on 28 January 2004 schools received 14 district memos related only to sport, and on 21 January 2004 schools received two circulars from the PHO and 10 district memos about notices of meetings, sports programmes and governance issues (Interview, principal 2, 2004). The high volume of memos churned out by the district office suggests a rather active and busy office, but it also portrays districts and the PHO as a strong external force and driver of school programmes and activities.

There appears to be no common protocol about how teachers and principals should communicate with the district office. Most principals permit teachers to contact district officials directly when they need to (Interviews, principals 1, 3, 4 and 8, 2004), while others have adopted a protocol that provides for teachers to contact relevant CDS officials via their HOD, who in turn informs the deputy principal and principal prior to such contact occurring (interview, principal 9, teachers 6, 2004). Hence in many schools teachers do not have direct access to CDS officials; their communication with CDS officials is mediated by higher-ranking staff within the school. In a sense, this creates a problem, as it serves as a barrier to forging closer relationships between teachers and CDS officials. On the other hand, principals are not bound by any protocol which demands that all communication between them and the various district Units be facilitated by the IDSO.

All principals indicated that they have direct access to all officials in the district office, and do not have to wait upon a nod of approval from the IDSO before they communicate with other Units in the district office for different issues. The district office has encouraged principals to follow this route by providing schools with district organograms that indicate the functions of the different units in the district office. The interface between principals and the district office is therefore broad and seamless; it is not confined to a singular point of entry (namely the IDSO), which, while improving efficiency and short-term effectiveness for the school, does limit the ability of districts to obtain a comprehensive picture of problems facing the school. This is not to suggest that all communication between schools and the district office be contained so that it occurs via the IDSO. On the contrary, the present system is welcomed as it discourages

dependency on one individual. However, it does imply that districts need to create additional mechanisms that allow them to obtain a fuller picture of what is going on in schools.

6.3 IDS activity – a view from the district office⁸⁴

This chapter has thus far attempted to illuminate how schools experience their interactions with district officials. One has to read further to obtain a comprehensive understanding of the activities of district officials from their own perspective. This part of the chapter, therefore, takes a closer look at the broad spectrum of tasks performed by IDSOs, and how they structure their activities in the course of a year. The work of IDSOs revolves around three main axes: school responsibilities, portfolio programmes, and seasonal activities. Each of these are examined in some detail, though less attention will be paid to the aspect dealing with school responsibilities as much of it has been covered earlier in this chapter, and to a smaller extent in Chapter 7.

6.3.1 School responsibilities

As mentioned in Chapter 5, each IDSO is allocated between 15 and 18 schools, for which they are held exclusively responsible. Some IDSOs complain that the number of schools allocated to them is too high, particularly when many of the schools in the group are ‘weak’. For example, IDSOs contend that a single IDSO would not be able to manage all the schools in an informal settlement (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

IDSOs regard themselves as ‘super-principals’ of schools (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004) and managers of principals (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004) as they are held responsible for everything that happens at a school. For example, they are expected to explain to the District Director what interventions have taken place in schools where matric results were found to be poor (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). Their task is to ensure that there is no conflict in schools and to make certain that schools are functional (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). As such, they are tasked with supporting principals in the management of schools. However, they also have a management function over principals

⁸⁴ The information for this part of the chapter has been obtained from interviews conducted with the IDS co-ordinator and IDSOs. The information reflected here is a synthesis of interviewees’ comments.

and are in a position to sanction them when matters are not ‘right’ at a school (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). Hence, more recently, IDSOs (informally) call themselves IDSMs, that is Institutional Development and Support *Managers*, a term that foregrounds the management role of IDSOs over schools (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

In addition to school responsibilities, IDSOs are tasked with dealing with portfolios, as discussed below.

6.3.2 Portfolio responsibilities

The IDS co-ordinator has demarcated IDS functions into ten portfolios. Each portfolio is co-ordinated by one IDSO, who is responsible for reporting on developments in the portfolio to district IDS meetings. However, all IDSOs are expected to carry out all functions expected of each portfolio. These functions correspond largely to the work carried out by specialists at the PHO, each of whom relay details on policy and other matters to the district office, for facilitating implementation in schools (see Chapter 5 regarding the top-heavy structure of the PHO).

Table 6.1 provides a broad overview of portfolio activity that IDSOs are expected to undertake.⁸⁵

⁸⁵ Information for this section of the chapter has been provided by the IDS coordinator and the three IDS focus groups (interviews: 2004).

Table 6.1 Portfolio activities that IDSOs are expected to undertake

Portfolio	Nature of activity
Adult Basic Education and Training Centres	Establish new ABET centres. Check that ABET classes are taking place, monitor registration of ABET learners, monitor learner and educator attendance, promote policy implementation, check and process claim forms of ABET staff, and work together with CDS district staff to support ABET centres on curriculum matters.
District Assessment Team	Work together with CDS and ESS officials to check school retention schedules at the end of the year to identify learners that should progress to the next grade or be retained in the grade. IDS officials convene this team.
Special projects	Involvement in special projects (such as the Equip Project) run by NGOs in schools.
OFSTED	Maintain links and co-ordinate activities with the OFSTED Unit at the PHO. Provide support to OFSTED-driven programmes such as Whole School Evaluation and Systemic Evaluation.
Scholar transport	Obtain statistics and inform the PHO of scholar transport needs.
Learner and teacher support materials and physical facilities	Liaise with relevant PHO staff (particularly the supplies section); check if Section 21 schools have received budget allocations for learner and teacher support materials; check if schools have ordered and received materials. ⁸⁶
Governance and SMT	Responsible for SGB training and monitoring of SGB and RCL elections. Support SMTs in school management
Independent schools	Check that independent schools are not abusing the rights of learners. Check for reasonableness of admission processes. Check if the school environment is consistent with health and safety requirements.
Early Childhood Education	Recommend the appointment of Grade R teachers to ECD centres. Work closely with CDS officials who are responsible for ECD.
Admissions	Update schools on changes to admission policy; ensure that the policy is adhered to; facilitate the admission of learners from overcrowded schools to less crowded ones.

As demonstrated above, IDSOs are responsible for a very wide range of functions, not only related to public schools, but to ABET centres and independent schools as well.⁸⁷ They are responsible for ensuring that ABET centres are functional and that independent schools comply with GDE policy. Indeed, IDSOs complain bitterly about their work

⁸⁶ The GDE has developed an E- catalogue of books with fixed prices because of inflated prices quoted by suppliers. Schools are expected to order all their support materials from this catalogue. The GDE has also centralised procurement of learner support materials for all schools through an agency called Edusolution .

⁸⁷ The IDS to school ratio referred to above excludes independent schools.

overload. Portfolio co-ordinators argue that they are unable to spend sufficient time with their schools because of portfolio responsibilities, and propose that the district office should employ staff whose sole responsibility would be the management of portfolios (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004). Some IDSOs grumble that their work is not structured enough and that their job descriptions are too broad and that they cannot get around to doing anything. They add that nobody seems to know what needs to be done and advocate the need for a “duty sheet” that IDSOs can follow (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) confirms that IDSOs do not have a formal job description, and function in terms of that which is outlined in the GDE organograms. IDSOs complain further that ‘our day is determined by crisis management’, that their plans cannot be put in place, and that they cannot do development work in schools because of other tasks (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004). Clearly IDSOs are frustrated by the workload they carry, and solutions seem to lie in increased staff numbers, as well as prioritisation of IDS work programmes. An advantage, though, is that much of the work of IDSOs is ‘seasonal’, that is, specific activities are focused upon during specific terms, so IDSOs are not expected to do everything all at once. This does not detract from the work overload experienced by IDSOs, but does appear to ameliorate its effects. Below is a broad outline of how IDSOs spend their time over the course of the year.

6.3.3 Seasonal activities of IDSOs

The activities described below are divided into the four terms of the school year, and do not reflect the overlaps that occur between terms. However, they do provide an overview of concentrated IDSO efforts during each of the terms, and spell out how IDSOs spend much of their time.

6.3.3.1 Term 1

The GDE School Effectiveness Programme dominates IDSO activities during the first month of this term. The programme involves joint school visits by district teams made up of IDS, CDS and ESS officials. Every school is visited by a team of district officials over the course of the month. The purpose of these visits is to check if schools are equipped to embark on their teaching and learning programme for the year. Timetables are checked,

school plans examined and the school log book checked for visits by the school IDSO in the previous year. The latter serves as a quality assurance measure to monitor IDSO visits to schools. In addition, the district team identifies problems that prevent the school from functioning effectively. A report of the school visit is then provided to the regular school IDSO, who is expected to follow up on problems experienced by schools. Problems generally identified by the district team range from maintenance issues to labour and staffing matters, many of which cannot be solved by the district office, but which need intervention by the PHO.

On the tenth day of the new school year, the district team is expected to facilitate the collection of information for the tenth-day school survey, which is initiated by the Department of Education. In terms of a GDE directive, district officials are also expected to undertake a head count of all learners in 10% of schools in the district. The latter is carried out to prevent schools from inflating figures of their learner population in the tenth-day survey. Learner population figures from the tenth-day survey are used to determine whether schools require additional posts, and in such cases IDSOs have to ensure (with the assistance of human resources personnel from the district office) that schools are staffed accordingly.

In the first term, IDSOs are also concerned with school admissions. In most 'township schools', admission of learners does not take place in the previous year, as is common in former Model C schools. Hence IDSOs have their hands full in this period; juggling the movement of learners from schools that are full to those that are less populated. Moreover, IDSOs have to deal with complaints from parents about school admission policies that prevent their children from being admitted to certain schools.

Many of the IDSO activities in the first term are derived from national and provincial requirements. The School Effectiveness Programme is a national directive aimed at ensuring that schools begin their learning and teaching programmes on time. The tenth-day survey (also a national initiative) is used, in the main, to ascertain whether schools have sufficient staff to manage the learner population at the school. Admission of learners at the beginning of the year is always a difficult period for GDE districts, owing to frequent movements of people into and within Gauteng. IDSOs are expected to ensure that learners are placed in schools at the beginning of the year, and are not discriminated

against in terms of school admission policies. In sum, IDSO activities in the first term are largely of a managerial and administrative nature, and they have little opportunity to engage in school development programmes based on the pedagogical and other pressing needs of schools.

6.3.3.2 Term 2

Two major activities dominate the lives of IDSOs in the second term. These include (a) following up on the problems identified by district teams in the first term, and (b) facilitating the completion of the annual school survey which is a major initiative of the Department of Education. In the case of the latter, IDSOs ensure that schools complete the surveys and adhere to due dates for submission. In addition, they offer advice and guidance to schools on how to complete the survey. In the case of the former, IDSOs are expected to support schools in finding solutions to the problems identified in the first term. Indeed, if one examines the focus of IDSO activity over the year, one would find that this is the only term during which IDSOs are able to concentrate on tasks emanating directly from schools.

6.3.3.3 Term 3

The third term is indeed a busy one for IDSOs. They are usually engaged in the following activities during this term:

- ❑ Check how far schools have progressed towards completion of the curriculum.
- ❑ Support schools to develop policies should they require it.
- ❑ Monitor whether schools have implemented what they had planned the previous year.
- ❑ Check whether schools have reached their targets for learner performance.
- ❑ Check whether secondary schools are properly prepared for and administering preliminary matric examinations.
- ❑ Check whether schools are adhering to admission policies in preparation for the following year.
- ❑ Check the new post establishment of schools to determine staff excesses or staff requirements.
- ❑ Participate in the district *indaba*, which is aimed at reviewing the district five-year strategic plan, based on the PHO strategic plan. The district plan is not always

adhered to as the education MEC and the GDE often introduce new mandates (such as the school feeding schemes) for the district office.

The third term clearly demands much of IDSOs. In a sense it is a 'mixed' term, because it carries with it a wide range of responsibilities associated with examinations, planning, curriculum monitoring and admissions. The above list of activities suggests that IDSOs spend much of their time in monitoring kinds of activities rather than developmental activities.

6.3.3.4 Term 4

The focus of IDSOs in the fourth term is on examinations and planning. IDSOs play an important role in checking whether there is any fraudulent or corrupt activity associated with matriculation examinations. In addition, they are responsible for signing off the progression/retention schedules of schools, which determine which learners could progress to the next grade in the following year. The fourth term is also concerned with planning activities for the following year. The district office communicates its year plan to schools, which are expected to develop their own plans within the framework of district plans. IDSOs support schools in preparing their school development plans, which are expected to be submitted to the GDE in November of every year. A part of the planning process is checking school budgets.

As in other periods of the year, IDSOs in the fourth term are engaged more with monitoring activities than support programmes geared at school development. Certainly the process of school development planning does offer an opportunity for IDSOs to support schools, but as evidenced earlier on in this chapter, schools do not appear to recognise this in any significant way.

In general, the picture about IDSO seasonal activities suggests that the work of IDSOs is structured more towards management and administrative functions, rather than those of development and support. Chapters 7 and 8 will explore the implications of this more fully. In the meanwhile, the following section shifts to what CDS officials actually do. It is not as comprehensively explored as that of IDSOs since CDS officials do not engage in as wide a range of activities.

6.4 CDS activity – a view from the district office⁸⁸

The activities of CDS officials, while different to those of IDSOs, have elements that often overlap with those of IDSOs. In the first term of the school year, CDS officials, together with IDSOs are involved in the School Effectiveness Programme (as discussed above). In the third term they facilitate the setting of examination papers for the matriculation preliminary examinations, and in the fourth term they team up with IDSOs to monitor matriculation examinations and check progression/retention schedules. Apart from these joint activities with the IDS, the activity of CDS officials focuses on school visits (for curriculum monitoring and support), the organisation of teacher development workshops that are either initiated by the PHO or by the district office itself, and the facilitation of cluster meetings. CDS officials regard their role as being to ‘support the PHO’ by ensuring that GDE and DoE policy is implemented (see also Chapter 7). During their school visits, they use a monitoring tool provided by the GDE, and also use this as a basis for their reports on schools. Schools are sent copies of this monitoring instrument prior to a school visit by CDS officials so that they know what is expected of them during a visit. CDS officials also have an important role in promoting standardisation across schools in a district. This occurs through the moderation of continuous assessment marks of learners. Since it is almost impossible for CDS staff to undertake this task on their own, they draw on the teacher cluster system for the execution of moderation activity.

A typical week of a CDS official looks thus: school visits on Mondays, Tuesdays and Wednesdays; Head Office Day on Wednesdays; District Office Day on Fridays. On some Head Office Days (about once a month), CDS officials attend curriculum information forum meetings convened by subject or learning area specialists at the PHO. Unlike the district office, the PHO has adequate staff specialists: one for every subject in the FET Band, and one for every learning area in the GET Band. These specialists offer advice to and develop policy specifications (on assessment and lesson planning, for example) for district-level CDS officials. CDS officials also attend task team meetings at the PHO, which focus on broader curriculum issues such as inclusion and assessment, rather than a particular subject or learning area.

⁸⁸ Information for this section has been obtained from an interview conducted with a CDS focus group (2004), my role as a non-participant observer in a CDS school visit, as well as informal discussions with CDS officials following the school visit.

CDS officials appear to have a greater opportunity to engage in educator development activities than IDSOs, who have too many other priorities (see above). However, as discussed above (under school visits and cluster meetings), as well as in Chapter 7, there is little evidence of significant CDS interventions that suggest support and mentoring of individual teachers. Much of the activity of CDS officials is directed at ensuring that schools understand and adhere to policy. One-on-one mentoring of teachers is almost unheard of, and there is an over-reliance on large workshops for teacher development activity. This is understandable given the low CDS to teacher ratio in districts, but the establishment of cluster leaders does provide an opportunity for CDS officials to direct their developmental efforts through workshops to teachers. It is probable that once there is some curriculum policy stability in the system (at least at the macro level), it will be possible for CDS officials to concentrate more on teacher development matters, rather on formal policy compliance issues.

6.5 ESS activity – a view from the district office⁸⁹

The ESS Unit at the district office provides three distinct kinds of services to schools: psychological services (provided by three staff members), the organisation of youth and culture activities (arranged by one staff member), and the facilitation of school sports programmes (co-ordinated by one person). As is evident, the relatively small staff component of the ESS Unit is responsible for a wide range of activities.

The psychological services component of the ESS Unit engages with a variety of issues including: the implementation of the School Nutrition Programme, career counselling, identifying learners that experience barriers to learning and placing them in special schools if necessary, and dealing with social problems such as teenage pregnancy. However, schools are expected to establish school-based support teams through which the psychological services staff provide support and guidance to schools. Staff of this section of the ESS Unit also link with staff of other government departments, such as the Departments of Health and Social Services, to deal with health and social problems in schools.

⁸⁹ Information for this section of the chapter has been obtained from the focus group interview conducted with ESS officials (2004).

The youth and culture desk of the district office also appears to be fairly active. It arranges special activities for days such as Youth Day, Women's day and Human Rights Day, and during school holidays organises youth camps and cultural festivals. In addition, it organises debates, choir competitions, drama competitions and speech contests at cluster, district and provincial levels. Many of the programmes are initiated by the PHO, although district officials do sometimes organise their own programmes. Despite the large volume of activity emanating from this desk, an observation in this regard, is that principals and teachers interviewed for this study did not perceive these as being a significant source of support from the district office. Either they neglect to involve their schools in these kinds of activities, or they simply shrug off these activities as insignificant because they probably involve a relatively small number of their learners. Nonetheless, the enrichment programmes offered by the district youth and culture desk do offer important opportunities for learners to go beyond their normal day-to-day school activities.

The sports co-ordinator in the district office also has his hands full. He facilitates the organisation of sports competitions at district, regional and provincial level, liaises with the Metro Council on matters regarding access to sports facilities for schools, and attempts to involve teachers in capacity-building programmes. (Many teachers are reluctant to participate in these programmes, as they seem to be overburdened with their own core functions.) Sporting events and competitive programmes are initiated by an external agency, the United School Sports Association of South Africa (USSASA), with whom the GDE has a memorandum of understanding. The district sports co-ordinator, therefore, focuses his activity on informing schools of these activities and on encouraging schools to participate in them. Hence most of his time is spent on paperwork, meetings and preparing for sports programmes. The GDE also has a memorandum of understanding with Metro Councils that facilitates free access by schools to their sports facilities

ESS staff complain that they simply do not have enough time to engage with all the activities they plan and hope to undertake. They argue that they are unable to focus on quality because there are far too many projects and not enough time to implement them properly. In addition, they complain that the Provincial Head Office often deviates from

planned activities for the year by adding new programmes during the course of the year (for example, events surrounding Ten Years of Democracy). ESS staff often meet with their counterparts at the PHO to discuss programmes and activities for the year. However, PHO level staff are more specialised in their activities; hence district staff are expected to engage not only with individual counterparts at the PHO but with a variety of officials responsible for specialised activities such as school safety, values in education and inclusion (see reference to the top-heavy structure of the PHO in Chapter 5).

6.6 Activities of the examinations unit – a view from the district office⁹⁰

As is well known, examinations play a crucial role in the education life of South Africans, and matriculation examinations in particular are constantly under the spotlight by the South African media and the public in general. What is not so well known is the activity behind the scenes of this major event. This part of the chapter unpacks the role of the district office in making examinations happen. In particular, it focuses on the examinations unit of the Sunnyside district office, which has a staff component of five administrators. Prior to the first restructuring efforts of the GDE in 1999, the function of examinations lay at the regional level of the system; the function was subsequently shifted to the district level, with regional staff distributed across the 12 new districts of the GDE.

The Examinations Unit provides administrative support for Grade 12, Grade 9 and ABET level 4 examinations. Given the administrative nature of its work, it comes as no surprise that all directives, policies and procedures regarding examinations emanates from the PHO. In its support for the administration of matriculation examinations, the district office is involved in the following specific functions:

- registering candidates for final and supplementary matric examinations (More recently, though, schools have been encouraged to register their own students with the aid of software provided by the GDE);
- distributing to schools common provincial test papers for the matric preliminary

⁹⁰ Information from this section is obtained from an interview with the examinations administrator based at the Sunnyside district office (2004)

- examination;
- ❑ distributing to schools final matriculation examination papers and other documents relevant to the exams;
 - ❑ facilitating administrative processes for the moderation of continuous assessment, practical and oral marks that contribute towards the final examination marks;
 - ❑ receiving matriculation examination papers from schools, and sorting and checking them;
 - ❑ distributing matriculation certificates (provided by the PHO) to schools; and
 - ❑ administering matric supplementary examinations.

The district office also plays a key role in providing administrative support for the implementation of common assessment tasks developed by the Department of Education for Grade 9 learners. The district office is involved in registering Grade 9 learners, distributing common assessment tasks received from the PHO (who in turn receive them from the DoE), and distributing mark-sheet templates to schools.

In the course of its duties, the Examinations Unit of the district office works closely with IDSOs, CDS officials and ESS officials. For example, ESS staff are central to identifying learners that may require concessions during matriculation examinations (but decisions on who gets concessions and what the nature of the concession should be are made by a Concessions Committee at the PHO). CDS staff are centrally involved in moderating the oral and practical marks of matric learners.

The district office, therefore, through the efforts of its Examinations Unit, plays a central role in facilitating the smooth running of the matriculation examinations through all its different stages. It is easy to predict that matriculation examinations could end up being a major disaster in the absence of district administrative support. Should this administrative service be centralised to the PHO, it will undoubtedly lead to a less efficient examination system.

6.7 Activities of the Human Resources Unit⁹¹

The Human Resources (HR) Unit falls under the administration section of the district office. One would therefore expect its role to be an exclusively administrative one. An examination of its activities, however, suggests that the services it provides to schools are of a broader nature. The HR Unit has three main functions:

- to ensure that schools are staffed in accordance with the post provisioning norms of the GDE;
- to help maintain labour peace in schools through the provision of mediation services to schools and the application of labour laws governing staff relations; and
- to build the capacity of administrative staff members, and facilitate the provision of counselling services to individual teachers.

With respect to its first function, the HR Unit checks whether schools are staffed in accordance with the post provisioning norms of the GDE. Should schools have an oversupply of teachers, the HR Unit facilitates the transfer of excess teachers to other schools; alternatively, if there is a staff shortage at schools, then the HR Unit facilitates the appointment of staff at the schools concerned. The HR Unit works very closely with IDSOs on staffing matters, as they are in closer contact with schools. The HR Unit also convenes meetings of school principals to explain GDE policies on staffing, update them on new policy developments and engage with problems raised by principals. Although the district office cannot make decisions regarding school staff allocations (this being national and provincial policy), it does have some leeway in deciding how to allocate *additional* posts it receives, as a district, from the PHO. For example, in 2004, the district office received 84 such posts, and with recommendations from the HR Unit and IDSOs, decided how the posts should be distributed between schools. This is not an insignificant function of the district, as it reflects recognition of the districts' knowledge of the schools it services, and therefore grants it the discretion to identify schools that require additional staff.

The role of the HR Unit is, however, not restricted to the distribution of posts. It also

⁹¹ Information for this part of the chapter was obtained from an interview with the Deputy Director: Administration (2004), and triangulated with information obtained from interviews with teachers and principals.

serves as a collection point for employment applications for vacant posts, both at the district office and at schools. Employment applications are forwarded by the HR Unit to the GSSC (see Chapter 5), which checks and verifies whether applicants meet the minimum requirements of the post. The applications are then returned to the district office for distribution to schools, where applicable. Once schools select their candidates, they forward their recommendations to the HR Unit, which in turn checks whether the process of selection was procedural, and thereafter forwards the recommendation of the school for approval by the District Director.

Thus the HR Unit of the district plays a key role in ensuring that schools receive their staff allocations in accordance with policy. Their work involves frequent communication with schools and, as the first point of call for schools on staffing matters, it is their responsibility to explain (and perhaps even justify) to schools the complex workings of the GDE's post provisioning norms. It is not an enviable task, as inadequate staffing is a constant complaint of schools and district officials are often unable to solve the more significant staffing problems at schools.

Labour relations problems are a common phenomenon in most South African schools and Tshwane South District is no exception. However, the Deputy Director: Administration (Interview, 2004) claims that the number of labour relations cases brought to his office has been declining steadily over the years. He attributes this to the increased awareness among teachers and principals of the new regulations governing labour relations. In the past 12 months, the HR Unit handled 17 disciplinary cases referred to it by IDSOs. In addition, it dealt with 11 grievance-related cases and one dispute. Disciplinary cases commonly relate to matters such as the misappropriation of funds, fraud, exam irregularities and absenteeism, while grievances brought to the Unit by teachers focus on matters such as unfair labour practice, leave and upgrading of post levels. The HR Unit is generally only involved in the initial stages of the cases brought to it. Thereafter, the cases are forwarded to the PHO for the preparation of charge sheets, hearings and the setting up of tribunals. Hence the district office has no authority to pass judgement on cases, nor can it decide upon sanctions for the offenders. Its role is limited to mediation and the issuing of warnings. The Deputy Director: Administration (Interview, 2004) claims that schools respect and recognise their authority in labour-related matters.

As part of its counselling services to teachers, the HR Unit arranges for teachers to access the services of experts such as psychologists based in the district office, government social welfare officials, and private service providers (for which teachers pay). In 2004, the Unit dealt with 30 cases of teachers requesting personal advice and counselling. Thirty teachers is certainly not a number to be discounted, and reflects the need for such a service in the district office.

Staff of the HR Unit meet frequently (usually once a month) with their counterparts in the PHO. The meetings are generally held to clarify policy matters and discuss problems experienced by districts. They also serve to promote uniformity in the application of labour and other relevant legislation across the 12 districts of the GDE.

In concluding this section of the chapter, one cannot avoid being overwhelmed by the enormous administrative effort required to promote the smooth running of schools. Whether or not the rather intense inputs into schools result in quality outcomes is a matter for another discussion. What appears to be evident, though, is that the Human Resources Unit in Tshwane South District has an important role to play supporting schools. They do not necessarily play this role effectively at all times (as was pointed out by some principals – see Chapter 5), but there do not appear to be any major mitigating factors that prevent them from doing so.

6.8 Conclusion

This chapter has described in depth the activities of the district office from two perspectives: that of the school-district interface, and from accounts provided by district officials of their programmes and activities. In so doing, it has shed light on the meanings attached by the GDE to districts.

The chapter illustrates that there is a highly visible, though variable, presence of districts in schools. Unlike in many other developing countries, where schools rarely come into contact with the district office (De Grauwe, 2000), districts in South Africa play a significant interventionist role in schools – at least as far as the GDE is concerned.

This chapter presents a divergent and complex picture of the school-district interactive

space. Principals and teachers alike differ in their perceptions of their interactions with district officials and the services they provide. While some principals view what district officials have to offer in a positive light and believe that they genuinely help schools to deal with their problems, others are less convinced about the developmental role of district officials. They believe instead that district officials are overly concerned with monitoring and policy compliance functions, rather than problem solving and developmental matters. In the case of teachers, too, some embrace the interventions of district officials in promoting policies directed at (as they believe) improving the quality of teaching, while others are less positive, and are critical of the emphasis placed on policy fidelity by district officials.

The detailed description provided in this chapter of the activities and programmes of district officials paints a picture of a very active district office. In placing the activities of key district officials under the microscope, it has explicated what districts officials actually do, and the kinds of activities that dominate their interaction with schools.

It is evident from the picture presented by district officials about the nature of their work that they spend much of their time on monitoring and policy compliance activities, rather than school development activities derived from the problems of schools themselves. Hence schools tend to experience district interventions more as pressure than as support. However, the discourse of support prevalent in the district, and indeed in the GDE as a whole (Fleisch, 2002a), and the empathetic approach adopted by district officials, ameliorates the negative effects of pressure placed by districts on schools. Therefore, the ability of districts to balance pressure and support interventions remains a major challenge to the work of the district office.

Internationally, governments apply a wide range of pressure and support mechanisms in different combinations and with different strengths to bring about school improvement. *Pressure* mechanisms have been categorised to include the following: distribution of resources (Fleisch, 2002), use of curriculum frameworks, setting performance standards, targets, inspections, audits, monitoring, incentives, sanctions, rewards and high expectations (Fullan, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2003). Such mechanisms, say educationists, are geared at providing direction to schools and improving education standards.

Support mechanisms, on the other hand, have been categorised to include: provision of resources and infrastructure, capacity building of school staff, increased motivation and improved staff morale, and development of institutional coherence and commitment (Taylor *et al.*, 2003; Fullan, 2003). Fullan (2005) emphasises the capacity building of school staff as a central means of support. He points out that ‘capacity building consists of developments that increase the collective power in the school in terms of new knowledge and competencies, increased motivation to engage in improved actions, and additional resources’ (Fullan, 2005:175). In general, external measures of support are aimed at empowering schools and individuals to meet the demand drivers of pressure.

In adjudicating the balance between the support and pressure roles of districts, a matter that deserves introspection is the relationship between the policy implementation and school support work of the district office. Is policy support complementary or contrary to school support? De Clerq (2002:3) argues that while South African policy discourse presents policy as an instrument of school support, the relationship between the policy implementation and school support work of districts is not ‘unproblematic, naturally aligned and coherent’, because policy is also often used as a tool of accountability. Elmore (2005) also contends that policy instruments cannot automatically be construed as support because they impose external mandates on schools, and swim against the tide of the schools’ internal culture and processes. Hence district activities, such as teacher training programmes that focus on curriculum policy orientation and transmission, cannot be automatically sanctioned as support interventions as they are externally mandated and do not derive from the needs of schools. This chapter confirms that many teachers experience the training programmes offered by the GDE as a form of pressure because they are often accompanied by new demands that teachers find difficult to accede to. Moreover, the large number of schools for which many curriculum support officials are responsible, the lack of adequate skills and knowledge on the part of district officials with respect to the new outcomes-based curriculum, and the focus of district officials on policy fidelity provides little basis for ‘real’ support to teachers. Even visits to schools that are claimed to be support interventions by district officials, and are ostensibly welcomed by teachers, do not automatically assume a supportative form to the outside observer when placed under the microscope.

My conclusion of the school visit undertaken by the CDS team (see above) is that while

CDS officials, in their language, attempted to emphasise at length the support nature of their visit, their practice suggested otherwise. Checking teachers' files and learner portfolios, verbally reporting on the district's negative findings on class visits in the presence of the principal, and the 'demand' placed on teachers for them to change their practice in terms of new policy suggests that a critical element of the school visit was indeed pressure rather than support.⁹² The activities undertaken by district officials in the name of support begs the question: what is real support, and how different is it, really, to pressure?

Darling-Hammond (1998:646) provides a repertoire of teacher development interventions that represent 'real' support to teachers. These include the areas of: pedagogical content knowledge, knowledge about children's development, understanding differences between children in terms of language, culture, age, gender, family, community and prior schooling, how to motivate children, how children learn, strategies for assessment, applying different teaching strategies that address a variety of ways of learning, strategies that use multiple pathways to content, the availability of curriculum resources and technologies, and the ability to analyse and reflect on their practice. Darling-Hammond (1998:662) notes, though, that first of all teachers need to understand the subject matter that enables them to represent ideas so that they are accessible to others. She argues further that teachers need to build a foundation of knowledge of the pedagogical learner to understand how learners think and reason, where they have problems, how they learn best and what motivates them.

The kinds of support provided by district officials to teachers exclude much of the importance attached by Darling-Hammond (1998) to pedagogical content knowledge, the application of teaching strategies and the understanding of learners and their environments.

Instead, district officials append significant attention to the forms, structures and technology of the new curriculum. They place great emphasis on policy requirements for planning and preparation, and methods of assessment, recording and reporting. The

⁹² While these conclusions about the interaction between school staff and district officials have been drawn from my observation of a single school visit by district officials, subsequent conversations with CDS officials revealed that they generally adopted similar approaches in their visits to most schools.

development of teacher pedagogical content knowledge is not viewed as being the core function of district officials, as the GDE has adopted a strategy of diverting this function to higher education institutions who offer a variety of teacher upgrading and certification courses that focus on pedagogical content issues. District officials do underline the need for learner-centred approaches to teaching as opposed to rote or teacher-centred approaches; but this is undertaken largely in the context of teacher training programmes geared at the introduction of the new curriculum.

The enactment of the support versus pressure dichotomy in Tshwane South District suggests that the concepts of pressure and support, as well as their related mechanisms of intervention, are not absolute. Pre-notions of support and pressure cannot remain intractable if they do not cohere with how teachers and principals experience and understand these. A distinction needs to be made between how support and pressure interventions are *actually* experienced, and how they are *intended* to be experienced. Currently, the dominant discourse of pressure and support reflects only the *intention* dimension, and overlooks the *experiential* dimension. This study demonstrates that privileging the *intention* discourse undermines how pressure and support levers are understood and applied in practice. By accepting the distinctiveness, as well as the embeddedness, of the concepts of support and pressure in the context of both their intention and experience, districts will be in a better position to strategise the nature of their interventions for school improvement.

Chapter 7

HOW STAKEHOLDERS ASSIGN MEANINGS TO DISTRICTS

7.1 Introduction

As the previous chapter revealed, the *raison d'être* for districts in the education system remains contentious. Whether districts exist primarily for policy and administrative control or whether the rationale for their existence resides in them serving as centres for school support, remains an unresolved matter in the literature. Chapter 6 demonstrated that in practice districts play several roles: that of monitoring agents of schools, that of facilitators of service delivery to schools, as policy agents, and as passive mediators between schools and the Provincial Head Office. This chapter captures stakeholder perceptions and perspectives of the roles, powers and relationships of districts, in response to the research question: *how do stakeholders assign meanings to districts in the policy context of post-apartheid South Africa?* It examines how stakeholders understand the roles and powers of districts, and how they perceive and experience the relationship between districts and schools on the one hand and districts and the provincial head office on the other. To a smaller extent, it explores how stakeholders understand the relationship between districts and other government departments, including local government.

However, before I begin, it is useful to distinguish between the concept of the district and that of the district office. This becomes necessary at this stage since the dualistic use of the term district could lead to some confusion. The term district is sometimes used in an all-encompassing way to refer to all components of the district such as schools, communities and the district office. At other times, it is used to refer exclusively to the district office. Mphahlele (Interview, 2004) defines education districts inclusively. He proposes that 'a district comprises all the schools, communities and education offices that

form part of the geographical location of the district'. He acknowledges, though, that there is often confusion about the usage of the term district, as it is sometimes used inclusively and at other times it is used to refer specifically to the district office itself (Interview, Mphahlele, 2004). In this thesis, I use the term district contextually, which means that the term could refer to either the district office or to the district as a whole, and that its meaning rests on the context in which it is used. At times, I do specify the usage of district office, to distinguish it from the other components of the district.

7.2 Stakeholder understandings of the role and place of districts in the education system

Stakeholders offer a variety of responses on what they perceive to be the role of districts.⁹³ None of these are unanticipated, startling, contentious or particularly novel. Nonetheless, their voices, from the ground, so to speak, construct meanings in a manner that makes the issues more palpable and alive. While stakeholder perspectives on the role of districts generally correspond closely to what exists in the literature, and to current district practice (see Chapter 6), the emphasis placed by different stakeholder groupings on the various roles of districts is a matter worthy of interest. For example, teachers, principals and district officials articulate their main understandings of district roles differently. Teacher unions also prioritise different facets of district responsibilities, compared to other stakeholders. Overwhelmingly consistent in most stakeholder responses, however, is the idea that districts exist to support schools. Concurrent with the idea that the role of districts is to support schools is the notion that districts have a key role to play in monitoring and supervising what goes on in schools, and in promoting and ensuring that policy is implemented in schools. A principal captures succinctly the sum of what of most stakeholders understand to be the role of districts, namely that

districts should supervise and support schools; they should help schools to interpret policy and promote the professional development of teachers and school Heads of Department (HODs). They should give guidance – not evaluate (Interview, principal 3, 2004).

The triangle of support, supervision and policy implementation roles reflected in the above statement provides an aggregated understanding of stakeholders' perspectives on

⁹³ In selecting the 'voices' of stakeholders, I have attempted to do two things: firstly, to aggregate or synthesise the common elements of stakeholder responses, and secondly, to reflect the range of perspectives provided by stakeholders.

the core role of districts.

However, this composite picture of the role of districts does not tell the whole story. Stakeholder groups differ between and among themselves on the emphasis they place on the differing roles of districts. One teacher, for example, emphasises the inspectoral role of districts. She suggests that

district officials should check that teachers are doing their work by coming to school and observing teachers for a week. They should put videos in the classroom. Their key role is to monitor teachers, but not in a harsh way (Interview, teacher 1, 2004)..

However, the same teacher simultaneously points to the need for districts to provide guidance and develop teachers.

NAPTOSA, a teacher union, argues exclusively for the support role of districts (and not a monitoring role), by emphasising that districts should be concerned primarily with service delivery and not play the role of ‘big brother’. Some teachers and principals are more concerned about the more specific kinds of support that districts should provide. One view is that schools need learning in action – not theory – that teachers need to know ‘what am I supposed to do when I teach in the classroom’ (Interview, principal 4, 2004). Another teacher highlights the need for districts to play a role in the personal development of teachers. She suggests that

districts should provide inspiration, stress relief, new perspectives on life and international perspectives on education (Interview, teacher 2, 2004).

yet another teacher spoke of the need for districts to help with transporting kids to sporting events (Interview, teacher 7, 2004). An additional, more specific, suggestion by one teacher is that districts should support schools by investigating places where learners could go for excursions (Interview, teacher 4, 2004). Calls for district officials to visit schools more often and be more visible in schools also emerged from some educators (Interviews, teachers 1 and 4, principals 2 and 9, 2004). The rationale for these calls is that district officials would have a better idea of what is going on in schools by visiting schools more often, and that their regular presence would make it easier for teachers to seek their support. The call by some respondents for districts to make their presence visible in schools is a far cry from the days of apartheid when circuit officials were not welcomed by schools, and instead were actively driven out. The overwhelming rejection of circuit officials at the time led to the almost total collapse of the inspectorate system

during the dying days of apartheid (Interview, Manganyi, 2005). Hence calls from teachers for district officials to visit schools more regularly reflect a significant shift in the perceptions of stakeholders on the role of districts, compared to those in the apartheid era, when local education structures were considered to be the carriers of apartheid policy and not welcomed in schools.

Several principals regard districts as currently serving only as messengers of the Provincial Head Office. Varying descriptions of this role, such as ‘go-betweens, station between schools and PHO’ and districts as ‘channels of communication’ suggest that some principals view districts as having a limited role in undertaking their own initiatives (Interviews, principals 5, 6 and 7, 2004). While some principals accept the messenger role of district officials and recognise that they ‘cannot shoot the messenger’, one principal argued that districts ‘should not only cascade information to schools’ but should have a ‘more clear and definite role’ that includes providing active support and guidance to schools (Interview, principal 7, 2004). Although most school-based educators believe that districts should have a role in supporting schools, one principal was cynical about this. He contended that ‘districts are redundant because teachers can learn among themselves’ (Interview, principal 3, 2004). He believes that ‘outside professionals’ should undertake workshops and courses for educators since the district office ‘lacks qualified people’, and that teachers are more qualified than district officials. He does concede, though, that if district officials were well trained and could offer quality services to schools, then they could play a role in supporting schools, but pronounces that ‘at present districts are a waste of state resources’. Speaking from a policy perspective, he adds that districts have a limited role to play because

districts do not appear anywhere in the policy continuum since the national and provincial levels of education develop policy, and schools implement these’ (Interview, principal 3, 2004).

This view finds resonance in a perspective offered by another principal who claims that the 2014 vision of the GDE will result in districts playing a reduced role, as it envisages schools to be mini-districts where most support services would exist within the school itself (Interview, principal 2, 2004). In this context, the district office would be expected to be more in the service of the PHO than schools. Indeed, the IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) believes that

ideally, if schools are a hundred percent functional, then district offices will have a limited role.

But most principals place unconditional value on the role of districts. One principal claims, for example, that if there were no districts, ‘the Department will not be accessible’ (Interview, principal 2, 2004), while another points out that

we will be negatively affected because there would be no personal contact and relationship with the Department (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

Yet another principal asserts that

if we communicate directly with the PHO, we will queue from sunrise to sunset (Interview, principal 6, 2004).

There is a view, though, which suggests that if there were no districts, the PHO could offer the same services as the district office (provided there was an efficient e-mail system), and, in addition, promote greater uniformity across the Department (Interview, principal 2, 2004).

While school-based educators in general emphasise the support role and to some extent the monitoring role of districts, district officials who work closely with schools underline the policy role of districts. Both IDS and CDS officials declare that

the role of districts is to ensure that provincial policy is implemented and adhered to (Interviews, CDS group, IDS groups 1 and 2, 2004).

Hence some officials consider themselves to be the ‘arms and legs of policy-makers’ (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004) and ‘foot soldiers’ (Interview, District Deputy Director, 2004) of the PHO. The IDS co-ordinator explains that the role of the district office is to ‘see to it that policy is implemented correctly’, and that districts need to ‘provide schools with guidance for the correct interpretation of policy’. If schools do not implement policy as required, then it is the task of district officials to conduct workshops, negotiate with teachers and report them in a supportive way (Interview, CDS focus group, 2004). CDS members also believe that the district office has a role to play in policy mediation, but they understand this to mean that they ‘take national policy as a basic requirement, and build up more requirements’ (interview, CDS group, 2004). A provincial official (interview, Rampersad, 2004) endorses the policy role of districts, and maintains that

the district office has a compliance role – district officials need to look for policy compliance.

In outlining the purpose of CDS Units, the district organogram (GDE, 2005) emphasises on policy, and indicates it as being ‘to co-ordinate and monitor the development and

implementation of policy'. In a similar vein, the district organogram states the purpose of the IDS section as being 'to promote the implementation of policies through overall institutional management, development, support and training programmes'. The organogram, however points to seemingly minor, though what could be considered as significant, differences in emphasis. While it accentuates the *monitoring* role of the *CDS Unit* in policy implementation, it underlines the *support* role of *IDSOs*. These differences may reflect a minor lapse in wording; on the other hand, they could suggest divergent thinking among the developers of the organogram. It is perhaps unwise to split hairs about wording at this stage.

Apart from the policy role of districts, district officials highlight the role of service delivery to schools, such as ensuring that schools have an adequate supply of teachers (Interview, District Deputy Director, 2004), and the importance of districts in

building bridges between the community and schools, and between schools across different races (Interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Some IDS officials also draw attention to the significant role of districts in conflict resolution and promoting stability in schools (Interview, IDS group 2, 2004). The District Director, though, understands the role of districts to be comprehensive and all-encompassing. He states that the

core business of the district is curriculum delivery, support, facilitation, training, monitoring and control (Interview, District Director, 2004).

in a sense, this captures what most stakeholders, compositely, perceive to be the role of districts.

School governing body associations (FEDSAS and NASGB stress the community role of districts. The NASGB believes that districts should be 'centres for community development', while FEDSAS advances that there should be a 'partnership between schools, districts and SGBs'. FEDSAS alleges that districts currently view school governing bodies as enemies; a commonly heard comment from district officials to principals is 'go back to your SGB and tell them how it is done'. FEDSAS believes that districts should not adopt a 'them versus us' approach towards SGBs, and advocates a closer working relationship between the two (Interviews, FEDSAS, NASGB, 2004).

In outlining their understanding of the place of districts in the GDE, most stakeholders

draw attention to their ‘sandwiched’ position in the Department. The IDS co-ordinator, for example, observes that

districts are in between, in the middle – responsible for the needs of the PHO as well as for the needs of schools,

while other district officials (like some principals referred to earlier) describe their position as

more like messengers, who go to school to collect documents and take them back (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

The ‘middle’ position of districts has led to some officials being frustrated about their inability to focus on tasks that they believe are important. Members of the ESS Unit, for instance, complain that

we have to contend with demands from two ends – services to schools and responding to directives from the PHO. We see ourselves as the former, but cannot play that role adequately (Interview, ESS group, 2004).

The perception that districts are more at the service of the PHO than of schools exists among a number of stakeholders. The IDS co-ordinator concedes that the ‘balance of district activity tilts more towards the PHO’, but explains this as a result of financial budgets being based at the PHO. NAPTOSA also has the perception that districts ‘lean too much to be the arm of the PHO’, and suggests that districts should not just be a facilitation body, but should initiate, drive and create their own activity. NAPTOSA argues further that ‘support is different to being just the arm of the PHO’ (Interview, NAPTOSA, 2004). However, provincial officials see no problem with districts taking their cue from the Provincial Head Office. Mali (Interview, 2004) claims that

districts are merely extensions of the PHO. They are not a decentralised body. If they were, the PHO would decentralise budgets to districts.

He adds that

districts should be considered more as operational sites of the GDE (Interview, Mali, 2004).

Another provincial official argues that

national and provincial priorities should take precedence over district activities (Interview, Chanee, 2004).

In this vein, districts are viewed as being more responsive to the needs of the PHO than to those of schools.

While almost all stakeholders accept that the main role of districts is to support schools through the provision of administrative and professional services, some stakeholders believe that districts should also have a management function over schools. Mphahlele (Interview, 2005) supports the idea that districts, as offices of the bureaucracy, are hierarchical, above schools, and therefore have a management function, as opposed to a solely administrative or support function. However, an interesting perspective offered by one provincial official is that while the district office in general should serve as a support unit for schools, the role of IDSOs should be regarded differently, as they have an oversight role over schools. This perspective suggests a differentiation of support and management roles within the district office by distinguishing between the roles of different kinds of staff.

Two central ideas emerge from the voices of stakeholders on the role of districts. One is that districts have to straddle the tension between the support, management and policy roles that are expected of them by schools and the PHO. The second is that districts have to resort to playing the role of passive mediator, the messenger, so to speak, between the PHO and schools. With respect to the former, certainly, district officials are struggling to define their place in the system as they constantly attempt to respond to both school and PHO demands. From a system perspective, it is apparent that districts are creatures of the Department, and that they owe their existence more to the PHO than to schools. Hence their agenda can be expected to derive more from the 'top', than from the 'bottom'. Indeed some IDSOs claim that 50% of their programmes and activities derive from the PHO, and the balance from schools (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004). Consequently, districts are forced to seek a fine balance between the management and policy roles expected by the PHO and the support roles expected from schools. While SAOU (Interview, 2004) makes it abundantly clear that 'districts cannot be both confidante and adjudicator since these are adversarial roles', districts, as they are presently constructed, cannot but attempt to navigate the labyrinth of support, management and policy implementation. Whether districts can, or should play the role of both referee and player is a matter explored later in this thesis.

There is an alternate perspective, though, which distinguishes between the management function of districts and their support role, by disconnecting the officials involved in undertaking these roles. This view suggests, for example, that the IDS Unit of the district

office should be regarded as the ‘management’ arm of the district office, while other units, such as CDS, be regarded as the ‘support’ arm. The idea of separating support and management functions in a district through staff specialisation of these roles has been employed in countries such as Sri Lanka and Nepal, where separate categories of staff have been created – Master Teachers and Resource Persons – to offer advice, while the remaining supervisors occupy themselves with traditional inspection tasks (De Grauwe, 2000). Given the difficulty faced by district officials in balancing their somewhat contradictory roles of support and pressure, this idea sounds appealing as it helps officials to define more clearly their place in the system.

In relation to the second theme, many district officials have resorted to seeing themselves as envoys of the PHO, either because of the nature of the work they have to do or (I would add) to avoid being labelled by schools as ‘inspectors’. De Clerq (2002), in her research on districts, also found that most district officials understand their work narrowly as passing down policies. Schools (particularly principals) also appear to find it easier to accept the passive mediator roles of district officials, though they would prefer more active support from districts. It seems plausible that the messenger role of districts provides a comfort zone within which schools and district officials can interact. The non-recognition of a significant policy mediation, policy translation or policy interpretation role for districts by stakeholders is perhaps not surprising given that districts see themselves as conduits of policy, rather than as active engagers with policy.

In general, the support, management and policy role of the district office, as articulated by stakeholders, resonates well with the literature on this subject (see Chapter 2). And the perception that district officials often serve as messengers of the PHO rather than as active mediators of PHO agendas also confirms Elmore’s (1993b) notion of districts possibly playing the role of ‘passive mediators’ between schools and the centre.

7.3 Stakeholder perceptions of the relationship between schools and district offices

Given the fear, animosity and hostility that characterised the relationship between schools and circuit offices in the apartheid era (see Chapter 3), it is tempting to explore whether the post-apartheid milieu has changed this in any way. It is almost compulsive to

investigate what the new relationship looks like at present. An examination of the relationship between schools and district offices acquires an even greater significance as it reveals how district officials balance their somewhat contending roles of support, management and policy.

In general, most school-based stakeholders concur that there is a positive relationship between schools and the district office, and most stakeholders (with the exception of a few) have positive views of the district office. There is little evidence of antagonism, resentment, rejection or dread on the part of schools towards the district office. There are levels of frustration, exasperation and impatience with certain officials, certainly, but not the overwhelming adversity that characterised this relationship in the past. District officials, too, consider their relationship with schools to be sound and constructive. However, stakeholders such as the SGB associations and teacher unions are less enthusiastic in their perceptions of the relationship between schools and the district office.

In the main, principals declare that they enjoy a ‘very positive, healthy, good and excellent’ relationship with the district office (Interviews, principals 1, 2, 4, 5, 6 and 7, 2004). They recognise that ‘the district office helps to solve problems’ (Interview, principal 1, 2004), and that they receive ‘100% support from IDSOs’ in particular (Interview, principal 2, 2004). Most principals have a trusting and close working relationship with the IDSO whom they relate to on a regular basis, and communicate with them on a first-name basis. One principal claims that he has more contact with the district office than in the past, and that his relationship with it is more ‘relaxed’ than it used to be before 1994 (Interview, principal 4, 2004). Another principal confirms that

we have a good rapport with district officials. I know them personally. I can go to them whenever I have a problem. I do not feel threatened by them (Interview, principal 7, 2004).

Yet another states that despite differences that may arise with district officials

we have an honest and open relationship with district officials. Sometimes we have differences, but we negotiate (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

This positive expression of principals’ attitudes towards IDSOs in particular is in part reflective of the nature of how IDSOs interact with principals. One principal explains that

IDSO’s do not demand from us – they come in and request. We do not see them as coming to look over our shoulder (Interview, principal 5, 2004).

Not all principals, however, experience the district office in the same way. For example, one principal states that his relationship with the district office ‘is not very good’ (Interview, principal 3, 2004), while another indicates that his relationship with IDSOs is ‘formal and professional’, but that it is ‘relaxed and more open’ with CDS officials (Interview, principal 8, 2004).

Part of the problem associated with the relationship between some principals and IDSOs, is that some principals see IDSOs as bearers of official instructions from the department, which they are bound to follow. Despite the relatively friendly relationship between the district office and principals, principals appear to respect and recognise the authority of the district office, in particular the IDSOs. One principal stated that he sees ‘the IDS as superior and more experienced’ (Interview, principal 5, 2004), while another perceives the IDSO as a ‘senior person’ (Interview, principal 8, 2004).

While principals, on the whole, tend to enjoy a good relationship with IDSOs, they are less keen on CDS officials. Much of this can be attributed to their experience of CDS officials as being ‘inexperienced’, ‘incompetent’ and ‘not equipped’ to handle their tasks. One principal, for example, alleges that

we have no faith in CDS officials – they cannot give guidance to our teachers. They do not turn up at cluster meetings, or turn up late. Things are often repeated and teachers learn nothing new (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

Another complains that

much of the information cascaded from CDS officials is questionable, and the manner in which it is presented is not to the liking of staff. For example, at a meeting of Grade 10, 11 and 12 teachers, the CDS official merely read the circular, and could not answer questions posed by teachers – they were vague and generic (Interview, principal 2, 2004).

With respect to the administrative component of the district office, one principal argued that

the district office in town could be more efficient. Sometimes they are unfriendly and not very helpful. Teachers complain that sometimes their salary issues take too long (Interview, principal 9, 2004).

Another complained of one labour-related case on which the district office ‘sat for weeks’, by which time the teacher who had been charged with misconduct had resigned and found employment at another school. The principal maintained that he had no problems with the lower levels of administrative staff, but hesitated to trust higher levels

(Interview, principal 4, 2004). In general, though, most principals had little to say about the administrative office of the district.

Principals, barring a few exceptions, appear to enjoy a close and friendly relationship with the district office, particularly with IDSOs. They have frequent contact with the district office, and appear to be familiar with its workings. They are concerned, though, about the lack of expert guidance and support received by their teachers from CDS officials.

Teachers also enjoy a relatively amicable relationship with the district office, though their interaction with district officials is more limited and less frequent than that of principals. Teachers describe their relationship with district officials variously as ‘friendly, free, humane, natural, fair and collegial’ (Interviews, teachers 2, 5, 6 and 7, 2004). No teacher described her relationship with the district office in negative terms. One teacher declares that ‘if we ask for help, they are keen to help us’ (Interview, teacher 2, 2004). Teachers do not believe that the CDS officials (with whom their interaction is more dominant) are ‘above them’. But there is a view that

teachers tend not to make use of the services of CDS officials – maybe because they are scared as a result of their historical experience with the circuit inspectors of the past (interview, teacher 2, 2004).

This probably explains why one teacher seeks the support of teachers from other schools rather than CDS officials when she has a problem (Interview, teacher 1, 2004). Many teachers do not appear to know much about the district office (interview, teachers 1, 6 and 7, 2004). They claim that they do not know the people at the district office, nor are they aware of the services provided by the district office – this despite the claim by IDSOs that schools have been issued with circulars outlining who is responsible for what at the district office. Teachers also suggest that

the district office should be more user-friendly. We need to know what its structure is, who to contact for what, and the kinds of services provided by the district office (Interview, teacher, 2004).

They appeal that

we need someone at the district office with whom we could have a close relationship with (Interview, teachers 6, 2004).

This sentiment is echoed by another teacher who emphasises that

district officials need to come to school and have tea with us so that we can talk

to them about our gripes. We do not want solutions – just to talk ... and get a pat on our back (interview, teacher 7M 2004).

The limited contact between teachers and the district office is perhaps not unexpected, given their limited involvement in administrative and management matters at schools. Nonetheless, their ‘distance’ from the district office, and the call by some teachers for closer contact with district officials does reflect a need for CDS officials in particular, to establish closer relations with teachers. Teacher experiences of the district office centre largely on their interaction with CDS officials, with whom they generally have a friendly relationship, but which does not appear to be close enough for them to be considered as mentors.

On the side of the district office, officials believe that they have a ‘sound’ relationship with schools, and a ‘good working rapport’ with them (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004). They have no concerns about being regarded as a threat to schools, and argue that their ‘legitimacy is recognised by schools’; they feel they are generally welcomed by schools (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004). In fact, the relationship between IDS officials and schools is so comfortable that the IDS co-ordinator expressed concern that

the relationship between IDSO’s and principals is becoming too informal, too friendly and less professional, and compromises the role of the IDS. ... we cannot allow friendship to compromise policy (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

The district office, therefore, has embarked on a system which rotates the allocation of IDSOs to schools every two to three years (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). Despite the seemingly cosy relationship they have with schools, IDSOs did express some misgivings about their relationship with schools. IDS officials, while recognising that ‘schools are loyal’ to them, and that ‘there is little resistance from the majority’ (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004), express concern that some principals undermine their authority (Interviews, IDS groups 1 and 3, 2004). Part of this is attributed to what IDSOs believe are perceptions by principals that they do not have the same experience and expertise as principals since ‘they have not gone through the ropes’.⁹⁴ The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) adds that

principals gossip that IDS officials are not doing what they are supposed to, and that IDSOs need training.

IDSO’s also voice concern about the fact that they are on the same post level as

⁹⁴ The appointment of IDSOs is not conditional on them having had previous experience as school principals

principals, which they believe has the effect of diluting their authority over principals.

The IDS co-ordinator confirms that

the issue of post levels is a problem, because principals sometimes do not respect IDSOs (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

The question of IDS authority over school principals is particularly relevant in relation to former Model C schools. IDSOs complain that

affluent schools have attorneys and advocates on their SGBs. IDS look like fools, especially with respect to disciplinary hearings. On financial matters, lawyers run rings around us. Although principals of former Model C schools are very friendly, they ignore us and do their thing (interview, IDSO group 3, 2004).

IDS officials are also concerned about their lack of authority over schools since

some principals see SGBs as their bosses, and not the IDSOs, because SGBs control the purse strings (interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

They feel that their 'inferior' position to principals of former Model C schools is also due to the fact that

principals of affluent schools earn much more: they get a car, cell phone, computer and earn extra salary (interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

They do not believe that the new Integrated Quality Management System, which involves the evaluation of principals by IDSOs, will impact on their relationship with principals, as the 1% salary increase associated with the IQMS is 'insignificant'. They observe that some schools already do not attend IQMS workshops organised by the district office. A further complication to the relationship between the district office and schools is that of gender. Although female IDSOs did not draw attention to any gender-specific problems regarding their relationship with schools, the IDS co-ordinator observes that principals do not respect female IDSOs.

While IDSO's expressed some disquiet about their relationships with some schools, CDS officials convey the contrary. They point out that

initially we had little co-operation from schools, but now schools are asking for district officials (Interview, CDS group, 2004).

However, there is a caveat to this claim. CDS officials allege that

if schools are functioning well, the district office is seen to be collegial, but if schools are poor-performing, then the district office is perceived to be a threat (Interview, CDS group, 2004).

From the perspective of some CDS officials, therefore, it appears that perceptions of them are dependent more on the type of schools they service than their own actions.

Though district officials and schools, in general, appear to consider their relationship with each other in a positive light, other stakeholders such as teacher unions and SGB associations are less enthusiastic. One teacher union official alleges that

people laugh about districts – they are regarded as inefficient and cannot be relied upon. They say that all that districts do is deliver circulars. Circuit managers are very powerful. The perception is that they want to play big brother. Schools either snigger at them or quake at them. If they play postmen, they do not command respect (Interview, NAPTOSA, 2004).

These perceptions are echoed by an official of an SGB association who claims that the dominant perception is that

districts tell schools what to do – not in a nice way. Principals say that they are poorly treated. District officials are seen to be more dominating than supportive. Some districts function very well. Some lack capacity, knowledge and expertise. For example, district officials often misinterpret regulations on SGB elections (Interview, FEDSAS, 2004).

Some SGBs, mainly from former Model C schools, also expressed concern about how district officials apply the department's admission policy. They charge that

districts try and intimidate principals to admit children even if the school is full (Interview, FEDSAS, 2004).

Concern about the district's application of school admission policy was also expressed by a member of another SGB association, who alleges that districts do not correctly implement the policy on admission since they do not facilitate the admission of pregnant girls to schools (Interview, NASGB, 2004)

SGB associations and some teacher unions, therefore, do not view districts in a positive light. There appear to be two reasons for this. Firstly, district officials are seen to be lacking the necessary skills and knowledge to undertake their tasks adequately. Secondly, the attitude displayed by some district officials to schools is seen to be overly controlling, rather than supportive. De Clerq (2002) concludes that the lack of capacity among district officials can be attributed largely to the restructuring processes adopted by the GDE in 2000, when staff were placed in posts through a system of self-assessment, rather than one which was objective or rational. Hence presently there are serious mismatches between people and posts, resulting in schools questioning the legitimacy and authority of

some officials whose performance is seen to be problematic.

Although schools and district officials generally perceive their relationship as being non-antagonistic, to the point of being cosy in some instances, district officials (particularly IDSOs) seem to believe that they do not command the respect they expect from some schools. A higher post level may improve their status in the eyes of principals, but on its own is unlikely to mollify their uneasiness as concerns about differences in income between themselves and principals, and perceptions about their lack of expertise and experience, are likely to remain for some time.

In contrast to negative perceptions held by many principals about CDS officials, teachers appear to be more buoyant about the support provided to them by CDS officials. Appeals by teachers for greater contact with CDS officials is indicative both of their need for greater support in their work, as well as, perhaps, the confidence that teachers have in district officials' ability to help them with their problems.

The perceptions of the district office held by teacher unions and SGB associations appear to contradict those held by teachers and principals. These differing viewpoints could, in part, be ascribed to the fact that teacher unions and SGB associations were speaking of their experience of GDE districts in general, rather than Tshwane South District in particular. On the other hand, their views may reflect a more generalised picture of the district itself, as the sample of schools selected for this study is not representative by any means. Another possible reason for the paradoxical perceptions of the district office is that teachers and principals themselves could have allowed their loyalty to district officials to transcend any misgivings they may have about the district office.

Notwithstanding the somewhat inconsistent picture emerging from stakeholder readings and experiences of the district office, it is evident that, in general, the relationship between schools and district officials is far more positive than it was prior to 1994. Districts have managed to turn around previously held suspicions and fears by schools about them. While this change in attitudes and relationships could in part be ascribed to the legitimacy of the post-apartheid government, the positive approach of district officials to schools appears to have reinforced their acceptance. No doubt there are major hurdles to overcome, but these do not obliterate the overall positive perceptions of the district

office held by teachers and principals, nor do they appear to significantly tarnish the somewhat friendly and collegial relationship that schools and districts appear to enjoy. However, the lack of experience and expertise among many district officials, and a greater tilt on the part of district officials towards policy compliance and other forms of accountability rather than support to schools, remains a threat to the continuation of this relatively amicable relationship.

7.4 Stakeholder perceptions of the relationship between districts and the provincial head office

As indicated above, programmes of the PHO significantly influence the functioning of the district office. The relationship between the district office and the PHO is therefore a critical factor in understanding the meanings assigned to districts. This section examines stakeholder perceptions of the relationship between the district and the PHO in terms of attitudes, outlook and approaches, as well as in connection with the distribution of power and authority between districts and the PHO. In considering the domain of the PHO, this section includes an examination of how stakeholders perceive the Gauteng Shared Services Centre and its impact on the work of the district office.

Much of the information in this section derives from perspectives offered by district and provincial officials, since schools have very little contact with the PHO. As one principal indicated,

we communicate very seldom with the PHO, because many of our problems are sorted out at the district level (Interview, principal 1, 2004).

Principals communicate with the PHO mainly on matters related to budget allocations, staffing or major maintenance issues. Some principals report positively on their experience with the PHO (Interview, principal 5, 2004), while others feel that some matters are dealt with inefficiently as the issues have to go through the district office before being taken up by the PHO (Interview, principal 8, 2004). Other stakeholders, such as the teacher unions and SGB associations, did not comment on the relationship between district and provincial offices as they had little experience of it.

The District Director appears to be quite satisfied with his relationship with the PHO since

decisions are not pushed down, and Head Office staff are very consultative in their approach (Interview, District Director, 2004).

Formal engagement with the Provincial Head Office takes place through the Broad Management Team of the Department, which, as its name suggests, is an inclusive management structure of the GDE, comprising staff occupying posts from director level upwards. The District Director claims that the BMT treats all participants as equals, and that the PHO does not force its views on districts. This claim is echoed by the IDS co-ordinator, who emphasises that

the relationship between the district and the PHO is not hierarchical; there are no juniors and seniors here (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

However, the IDS co-ordinator draws attention to the problem of lines of accountability between district officials and the PHO. Although technically district officials are accountable to the District Director, there is a 'dotted line' of accountability to programme managers at the PHO because they are responsible for programme budgets. The IDS co-ordinator feels that he is not accountable to only one senior manager at the PHO, and that he 'does not know who the boss is', because IDS activity cuts across a number of different programme managers. While senior officials of the district office convey a constructive attitude towards the PHO, lower-level officials are less enthusiastic. One group of IDS interviewees, for example, grumble that

the PHO dumps things on us in the last minute, and we cannot get around to do anything (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

CDS officials, too, express their frustration with the lack of planning on the part of the PHO. They allege that

there is no year plan from Head Office. We have to change our programmes all the time, then schools think that we are disorganised. Everyone from the PHO sends directives and invitations, and things clash (Interview, CDS group, 2004).

The sentiment that PHO programmes often usurp district programmes is echoed by officials of the ESS Unit, who charge that

districts programmes cannot be implemented because Head Office changes things in the last minute; the PHO wants to dictate which programmes to run (Interview, ESS group, 2004),

and IDS officials who complain that

we have never been able to put plans into place because the top says that we must do something else (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

De Clerq (2002:4) also draws attention to the serious undermining of district operational

plans by the PHO. She points out that ‘head office is often criticised by districts for changing and adding upon GDE priority plans because of unexpected last minute new priorities from the DoE or the politicians’. A provincial official (Interview, Rampersad, 2004) contends, however, that while the imposition of new priorities and calls for unplanned meetings were a common occurrence in the past, this has now changed because of better planning on the part of the PHO. She claims that only 10% of the time is now unplanned, largely because the national Department does not provide its activity plans to the PHO. For example, in 2003, district officials were called upon unexpectedly to monitor the matriculation examinations in terms of the National Protocol on Exam Monitoring. She acknowledges, though, that ‘the district office does not really do its own thing’, but adds that ‘the PHO does not prescribe how districts should support schools’ (Interview, Rampersad, 2004).

In addition to problems of planning and scheduling, much of the frustration experienced by district officials arises from budgetary issues. IDS officials point out that the budgetary allocations to districts are often too late and too little for them to develop and undertake programmes. By September 2004, for example, the units in the district office had not received their budgets for the 2004/2005 financial year.

Officials also attribute the problems they experience with the PHO to what they perceive to be the lack of experience of PHO officials. Some IDS officials draw attention to comments made by schools in this regard, pointing out that

principals see the PHO as a laughing stock because people appointed at the PHO are not experienced (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

Apart from these problems, district officials also complain about the inefficiency of the PHO. Several IDSOs (interview, IDS group 3, 2004) point out that ‘the PHO takes an incredible amount of time to reply to a letter’. For example, if IDSOs recommend the expulsion of a particular learner, the PHO takes an inordinately long time to deal with the issue, thereby flouting policy that deals with such matters.

From the perspective of senior district officials, the relationship between the district office and the PHO is viewed as being collegial, while lower-level officials appear to be experience frustrations with the PHO. Chanee (Interview, 2004) affirms that while the relationship between the district and provincial officials is ‘generally collegial and

professional, it is not altogether harmonious'. He acknowledges that 'the problem of dual accountability does create tensions', but that the existence of planning and operational forums that include both district and provincial officials does play a role in alleviating tensions and problems (interview, Chanee, 2004). The existence of a wide range of operational forums such as the Curriculum Information Forum which includes curriculum co-ordinators from all districts and relevant PHO officials, and human resources clusters that include senior human resources officials from all districts, are found to be very useful by district officials as they provide an opportunity for information sharing and problem solving.

A major issue confronting the PHO with respect to district/province roles is that of the lack of synergy between the work of the Office of Standards for Education and Development, which is based at the PHO, and the district office. Both the district office and OFSTED are involved in school evaluation and school improvement processes; however, there is little collaboration between the two units. In particular, there is a predicament about how the findings of OFSTED can be used by the district office to help schools develop their school improvement plans. OFSTED has proposed that this problem be addressed through the development of an integrated school accountability framework, which would allow it to collect information about schools from districts, both routinely as well as at specific planning points in the year. This would involve IDSOs undertaking compulsory monitoring visits to schools to look at timetabling, admissions, teacher utilisation and fee issues (Interview, Chanee, 2004). Should the OFSTED proposal be accepted, it would undoubtedly result in IDSOs focusing more of their energies on monitoring work, rather than responding to school needs.

In general, the relationship between districts and the PHO appears to be uneasy, marked by both positive (by senior district officials) and negative (by lower-level district officials) perceptions. The structural relationship between the two levels dictates that districts have no choice but to accede to provincially driven programmes. However, the collegial and inclusive approach adopted by the PHO appears to have undercut a potentially antagonistic relationship between the two levels. Inter-district forums in particular appear to serve a crucial role in reducing tensions between district and provincial offices. This is not to say that there are no challenges. As De Clerq (2002) points out, it is not easy for district officials to negotiate the functionality of the 'hard

line' bureaucratic accountability which operates within the district office, and the 'dotted line' programme accountability which operates within particular programmes.

Despite frustrations about the PHO voiced by many district officials, the dominant emerging picture about district-PHO office relationships is not one of hostility, resistance or opposition. Instead, we see a struggling environment in which district officials are subject to contending forces that push and pull in differing directions, resulting in a somewhat frustrating environment for district officials.

7.5 Stakeholder perceptions of the distribution of powers and functions between districts and the PHO

In the context of the decentralisation literature, districts can be conceived as deconcentrated units of the PHO, rather than as devolved structures that have authority and power. But even within the limits of a deconcentrated status, there are frequently tensions about whether districts should be afforded greater or less authority on this or that matter. The powers and authority of districts are, therefore, forever being modified. For example, districts in the GDE were recently authorised to deal with the admission of over-age learners to schools, which in the past was the function of the Head of Department. IDS officials claim that the shift in authority arose as a result of the high volume of admission appeals from learners, which could not be managed at the PHO. In general, though, while stakeholders do not argue for a fundamental change to their relationship with the PHO in terms of their power and authority, there are rumblings about the desire for districts to be granted greater authority on some issues.

Some principals argue, for example, that the district office should assume responsibility for facilitating emergency repairs and major maintenance of school buildings from the PHO, as the present system 'takes too long' (Interview, principal 6, 2004). IDSOs also complain about the PHO changing their priority list of schools where maintenance needs to be undertaken (Interview, IDS group 1, 2004). Should maintenance become a function of districts, as principals have suggested, the GDE would have to create additional posts for each of its 12 districts. Some may construe this proposition as wasteful, as it would result in the duplication of services across districts, and a dispersion of scarce skills and

resources. On the other hand, maintenance is regarded as being crucial for the smooth functioning of schools, and the redirection of resources to a service that is central to school functionality may be worthy of consideration.

Another issue that principals have highlighted is the lack of district authority to approve the hiring of substitute teachers. They claim that learners are sometimes without teachers because the process of obtaining substitute teachers is too cumbersome (Interview, principal 7, 2004). On occasion, over-enthusiastic district officials are known to have acted (unknowingly) without the necessary delegated authority. A teacher union claims, for example, that it has taken up legal cases where district officials have confirmed the appointment of teachers in their posts and approved the salary levels of teachers without the necessary delegated authority (Interview, SAOU, 2004).

IDSOs express concern about their lack of authority to deal with matters such as the disciplining of learners, the upgrading of schools and the determination of sites where schools should be built. They claim that between 1994 and 2001 they did have the authority to make decisions about where schools should be built, but that this authority has been eroded. They feel that 'their hands are now tied, since they have to refer matters to everyone else'. They convey a feeling of helplessness because while they are able to identify problems or receive them, they are unable to do anything about them (Interview, IDS groups 1 and 2, 2004).

While IDSOs are concerned about their lack of authority on matters related to schools, the District Director is predictably more concerned about matters pertaining to the district office. He emphasises the need for a re-examination of the powers that are delegated to him, particularly with respect to the appointment of district staff (decisions about this are currently made at the PHO) and the procurement of services. The District Director does, however, point to one school-related matter which he believes should be dealt with at the district level rather than PHO level. This relates to his authority regarding the sanctioning of teachers in cases of misconduct. The District Director argues that when there is a disciplinary hearing as a result of teachers violating their conditions of service, he has no authority 'to pass judgement' on the outcome of the hearing. He can only make recommendations to the Head of Department, who is entitled to make the final decision on the matter. He believes that decisions on matters of this nature should lie at the level of

the district office because it would be more efficient (Interview, District Director, 2004).

Not all district officials, however, are concerned about the limitations of their decision-making powers. The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004), for example, believes that the

district has enough space and discretion on how to operate. There is leeway, and there is flexibility. We can bring about change. We are not restricted.

He points out that IDSOs can, for instance, advise the District Director on the merging and closure of schools. However, he simultaneously argues for districts to have the authority to raise their own funds and have their own bank accounts (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

A surprising element of stakeholder responses to the question of district power and authority is their lack of reference to issues of policy. Neither principals nor district officials displayed any aspirations for districts to develop, interpret or adapt policy in a manner that would suit local conditions in their schools. Perhaps they believe that policy is untouchable! Indeed provincial officials corroborate this perception. One provincial official emphasises that

there is little room for policy interpretation because districts know what the policy is, and what is expected of it (Interview, Mali, 2004).

In a similar vein, another provincial official remarks that

policy is not flexible, but aspects of it may provide room for flexibility (Interview, Rampersad, 2004).

Given the overriding concern of the PHO with policy fidelity, it is easy to understand why district officials do not regard policy mediation for adaptation to local conditions as a priority or, for that matter, even a possibility.

It appears that while district officials do not aspire towards an overhaul of their powers and authority within the GDE, they do reflect concerns about the limitations of specific aspects of their delegated authority. However, the issues focused on by district officials are not insurmountable, and can be dealt with through discussions and negotiations with the PHO. Considerations about uniform and equitable applications of policy across districts are certainly important, as the effects of decisions must appear to be even-handed to stakeholders and the public in general. What is revealing though about the issues raised by district officials is the acceptance of their status as deconcentrated units of the PHO.

Here there is no agitation for a separate tier of governance or management with original authority. And, as posited in the decentralisation literature, if there is no proclivity on the part of lower levels of a system towards greater autonomy, there is little need to consider alternative or deeper forms of decentralisation.

7.6 Stakeholder perceptions of the relationship between the district and the GSSC

There is little consensus among stakeholders about whether the Gauteng Shared Services Centre has indeed brought about improved efficiency and effectiveness. Some district officials believe that

the new system is more efficient because it cuts down on unnecessary labour and the duplication of personnel across districts (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004),

while others believe that

the GSSC is a big thorn in our side because the procedures to get things done are cumbersome, and the quality of services procured by the GSSC is poor (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004).

The efficiency of services procured by the GSSC is questioned by some officials. One provincial official quotes the example of calculators purchased by the GSSC for learners, that were much more expensive than 'normal' prices, because 'there were too many sub-contractors' (Interview, Rampersad, 2004). IDS officials moan that the GSSC procures the services of poor-quality caterers (Interview, IDS group 3, 2004). However, there is also a view that many of the problems associated with the GSSC in the initial years were 'teething problems', and that

the GSSC has now changed because they have individuals responsible for particular districts (Interviews, District Deputy Director; CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

Officials claim that in the first few years of its inception, the establishment of the GSSC resulted in chaos in the system as 'papers got lost, and documents had to be re-sent all the time'. Furthermore, 'the vacancy list was in a mess because wrong posts were advertised. Principals had to sit together for days on end with their laptops, trying to put things together' (interview, CDS co-ordinators, 2004). Now, however, some officials believe that the services are 'not so bad' and that 'things are improving' (Interviews, District Deputy Director, CDS co-ordinators, 2004).

This section is not so much about the GSSC, as how it relates to the district office, so let me not digress too much. Districts rely on the GSSC for many of their administrative functions, such as processing teacher appointments, paying for services and accounts, advertising posts, budget management, tendering, and procuring services. Hence their own efficacy and standing in the eyes of schools depends much on the competencies and capabilities of the GSSC.

In addition to district concerns about the capacity of the GSSC to deliver what is expected of them, there is concern too about some of the powers of the GSSC. The District Director believes, for example, that the GSSC should not be empowered to make decisions about the selection of service providers, that instead districts should have the authority to do so, and that the GSSC should only be involved in processing issues. A district official describes the status of the district office as a 'Section 20 school', as it does not manage its own budget nor does it procure its own services. However, he does not view this as problem 'as the GSSC has contacts for everything, and has more information for making bookings, etc.' (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004).

It seems, then, that while there are concerns about some of the powers of the GSSC, there is no outright call for a total resumption of administrative functions by districts.

There appears to be much frustration on the part of both district and PHO officials about the powers and efficacy of the GSSC and the negative impact on their ability to deliver services to schools. The GSSC appears to be a moving target, however, as its capacity to provide services seems to be improving (see chapter 5). Only time will tell whether the initiative by the Gauteng government to centralise administrative services will meet its expectations.

7.7 Relationships between the GDE, other government departments and local government

Discussions on the relationship between education and local government occur at two levels. Firstly, there is government rhetoric on integrated service delivery to the public. In this regard, the Minister of the Public Service and Administration indicated in a speech to

Parliament on 19 October 2004 that ‘by integrating the public service and local government under the same legislative framework, we will strengthen co-ordination between the spheres of government, eliminate fragmentation and make seamless service delivery a reality’. Hence government advocacy for integrated service delivery points to the need for a stronger relationship between education and local government. Secondly, the preoccupation of education policy makers in the early 1990s with a direct role for local government in education (see Chapter 3) continues to this day. For example, at a DoE workshop held on 18 September 2003, Duncan Hindle, a senior Department official⁹⁵ proposed that

in the fullness of time, we can expect local government to play a role in education. Local government must play a role in the provision of facilities such as libraries and sports fields to schools.

Discussion on local government involvement in education is not confined to the national level alone. In the late 1990s, provincial education departments across the country were preoccupied with reorganising their sub-divisions to align them with local government boundaries, according to a cabinet decision in 1997 (see Chapters 4 and 5). The Free State provincial Department of Education, for example, reported at a HEDCOM meeting on 13 December 1999 that it had initially planned to establish five districts but had extended this number to six ‘to enable Education to integrate its activities with those of other social service department structures (DoE, 1999c: Item B. 3.1 (b) (v)).

The GDE, too, has considered local government involvement as part of its ongoing debates on education (Interview, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). Through its restructuring exercises, the Gauteng government has coincided its education district boundaries with those of local municipalities. In its 2003/2004 Annual Report, it indicated that ‘the districts are also wholly located within local government boundaries’ (GPG, 2004:16).

Principals and district officials alike observe that the alignment of district boundaries with those of local government has made no impact on schools in terms of services, nor has it altered their relationship with local government structures in any way as they have almost no interaction with municipal officials (Interviews, principal 1, IDS co-ordinator, 2004). A senior PHO official remarks that she is not certain that boundary alignment between education and local government has been accompanied by any benefits to education

⁹⁵ In May 2005, Hindle was appointed as the Director-General of the Department of Education

(Interview, Rampersad, 2004).

Several stakeholders recognise that local government structures are not in a position to absorb education functions because municipalities themselves are struggling to fulfil some of their core functions such as water and sanitation provisioning. Moreover, municipalities across the country are so diverse with respect to their resource capacity that they are likely to replicate such inequities in education (Interviews, Davies, Boshoff, 2004). Boshoff (interview, 2004) points out that a stronger role for local government in education, as is found in the USA and the UK, should not be on the agenda at this time as the emphasis in South Africa should be on uniformity rather than fragmentation. He adds that 'local governments in Western countries receive far higher budgets than they do in South Africa, and that we have a distance to go before we latch on to their model'.

However, consideration for local government involvement in certain aspects of education has not been obliterated altogether. Both Boshoff and Mphahlele (Interviews, 2004) advocate that local municipalities can play a role in providing sports, health, transport and library services and facilities to schools. Indeed, this is, to an extent, already occurring in the GDE. District officials frequently liaise with the Metro Council on matters regarding access to sports facilities for schools. This is supported by the Memorandum of Understanding signed by the GDE and the Metro Council, which facilitates free access by schools to local government sports facilities (Interview, ESS group, 2004).

Davies (Interview, 2004), speaking from a different angle, recommends that schools could be made subject to municipal by-laws on safety issues, such as fire management and the quality assurance of building infrastructure, if provincial education departments assign such functions to local government authorities. Malherbe (Interview, 2004) points to another avenue that can provide for greater integration between education and local government. He suggests that municipal officials could be invited to participate in SGB meetings, and conversely that principals could be encouraged to participate in relevant local government structures.

As is evident, the debate about local government involvement in education is far from being off the agenda. While the current debates do not reflect earlier visions about the relationship between education and local government (see Chapter 3), they certainly do

suggest a leaning towards some consideration of local government involvement in education. To date, however, there appears to be little impact of these discussions in schools and districts. The debates need to be widened to include schools and other stakeholders such as SGB associations and teacher unions, and a practically oriented emphasis placed on how local government and education could provide integrated services to schools.

With respect to the relationship between districts and other government departments, there appears to be little networking in this regard. District officials have a limited role in interacting with officials from other government departments (Interview, IDSO co-ordinator, 2004). Schools, however, of their own initiative, have established links with the Department of Social Welfare (for issues such as child support grants, poverty relief, trauma and learner absenteeism), local clinics of the Department of Health, as well as the local police (Interviews, principals 1, 2 and 9, 2004). A principal indicated that she often kept in touch with social workers directly, but that they were also understaffed and could not help schools when needed (Interview, principal 6, 2004). Principals suggest that the district office should facilitate networking between schools and other government departments, in particular the Department of Labour, to assist schools in directing matric learners to employment opportunities (Interview, principal 2, 2004). Clearly, there is a role for districts in facilitating stronger links between schools and other government departments.

7.8 Conclusion

This chapter reveals that stakeholders ascribe multiple roles to districts, with different stakeholders emphasising different roles. While provincial officials emphasise the supervisory, policy transmission and policy compliance role of districts, teachers in general emphasise the need for districts to serve as mentors and be responsive to their professional needs. Principals underline the need for districts to support schools in both professional and supervisory functions, while SGB associations draw attention to the importance of districts in broader community involvement and development. Districts are caught in the middle, and recognise their role as reflecting all that is expected from schools and the PHO, namely, that of support, management and policy compliance. To a smaller extent, some district officials cast the role of districts as facilitators of racial

harmony between schools. However, underlying stakeholder perspectives of district roles is the belief that districts exist to ensure that schools deliver quality education to learners, either through the mechanisms of support or pressure. There is a perception, too, by some stakeholders that districts serve no other role than as a channel of communication between schools and the PHO, that district officials are only emissaries of the PHO rather than active players in the policy process or designers of their own agendas.

The multiple roles expected of districts by stakeholders imply that district officials have to perform a fine balancing act in order to meet the expectations of these seemingly irreconcilable roles. One view advocates that district officials cannot be expected to play all of the roles expected of them as they stand in contradiction to each other, thereby constructing the district as both player and referee. A possible solution to this problem is a delineation of roles between officials that provides for the separation of support and pressure functions expected of the district office (see example of Sri Lanka and Nepal above).

Stakeholders perceive the relationship between schools and the district office to be fairly amicable, particularly that between principals and IDSOs. There is little evidence of resentment or animosity on the part of schools towards district officials, nor is there any indication of an unhelpful attitude towards schools on the part of district officials. However, principals are disparaging about the capacity of CDS officials to provide professional support to their staff. Teachers, on the other hand, appear to enjoy an affable relationship with CDS officials, but lament their limited contact and interaction with the district office. In opening their doors to the district officials, teachers, despite some exasperation about the lack of capacity of district officials, signal a growing need for emotional and professional support.

The positive relationship between schools and districts is surprising, given both the historical baggage that districts carry from the apartheid era, as well as the supervisory role of district officials. This can be explained in part by the political legitimacy provided by the post-apartheid government, although this on its own does not explain the constructive attitudes of schools towards districts. The 'soft' approach adopted by districts towards schools also appears to have had a significant impact on winning the hearts and minds of most schools. Certainly some schools believe that 'if there was no

district office it would be a disaster' (Interview, principal 5, 2004).

The relationship between the district office and the Provincial Head Office can be described more in terms of what it is not, than what it is. It is not perceived by stakeholders to be antagonistic, and district officials are not disloyal towards the PHO. In the main, stakeholders perceive the relationship between the district office and the PHO as being professional and cordial, with some officials drawing attention to the consultative and participatory approach to decision making adopted by the PHO. However, the tensions that exist between these two levels of the system cannot be underplayed. Much of this arises from the dual lines of accountability (hard and soft) that exist between the district office and PHO, as well as the perceived lack of planning on the part of the PHO. In addition, perceptions about the limited experience and expertise of PHO officials do little to combat the frustration felt by district officials.

Stakeholder perceptions about the distribution of power and authority between districts and the PHO indicate no clamour on the part of districts or schools for a significant overhaul of existing power relations. Certainly, districts express concern about their lack of authority on a number of issues, which they believe compromises their ability to adequately deliver services to schools. The delegation of authority to districts to, for example, undertake major repairs and maintenance to schools, decide on the selection and appointment of district staff, decide on matters related to the disciplining of learners and, most controversially, to raise funds has been raised by stakeholders as key to the effective functioning of the district office. While many of the issues raised by stakeholders can easily be dealt with by the stroke of a pen, the aspect relating to district authority to raise funds appears to be the most contentious, as it has legal implications for the status of the district office (see Chapter 5). In general, though, stakeholder concerns about the powers and authority of the district office do not reflect an aspiration for significantly deeper levels of decentralisation.

This chapter demonstrates that there is little evidence of integrated service delivery to schools in terms of services provided across government departments and local government structures. District officials admit to having little interaction with other government departments, or with local municipalities. Schools, on the other hand, have established their own links with lower-level structures of other government departments

such as health, social welfare, and safety and security. They advocate the need for greater support from districts in this regard. The role of local government in education is an ongoing debate in both the Department of Education and the GDE. Possibilities for greater co-operation between education and local government on aspects such as the provision of library services, sports facilities, and building quality assurance and maintenance are mentioned by stakeholders. However, much of this remains at the discussion stage.

On the whole, stakeholders value what districts have to offer, despite their disquiet about the limited experience and expertise of district officials. Stakeholders believe that if there was no district office, schools would be in a chaotic state and would struggle to get things done on time. There is a view, though, that in the long term the role of the district office could gradually diminish as schools become more functional and self-sustaining.

Chapter 8

THE MEANINGS OF DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICA: IMPLICATIONS FOR THEORY, RESEARCH AND PRACTICE

8.1 Introduction

This study commenced by inquiring how the spatial and political idea of districts came into being in the South African education system, and how it did so in the absence of official policy. It asked why there was no explicit government policy on education districts, particularly in view of the ubiquity of districts in South African education policy discourse. The question was pursued by exploring the origins of education districts in South Africa. In doing so, the study elucidated the character of South African local education, and illuminated the niche that districts occupy in the education system. These issues were explored, in the main, by probing stakeholder understandings of the meaning of districts in the constitutional, legal and policy contexts of post-apartheid South Africa. By invoking Sutton and Levinson's (2001:4) thesis that 'people make policy through practice', the practical meanings assigned to districts by schools, and by provincial and district officials, were brought to light.

This chapter crystallises and then re-examines the key findings of the study, using the lenses of decentralisation and school improvement to analyse and explain the phenomenon of local education in South Africa. Given the multiplicity of roles that districts can play in education (Elmore, 1993b; O'Day & Smith, 1993), this chapter lays bare what districts do and recapitulates stakeholder understandings of why districts exist. The dramatic shifts in schools' perceptions of districts since the apartheid era are examined and the implications of the structural problems besetting districts are explained.

The chapter concludes that the dilemma facing districts is shaped by two dichotomies – pressure *versus* support, and centralisation *versus* decentralisation – which can be transcended only through carefully considered interventions.

8.2 Local education in South Africa

South Africa does not have a single, uniform, standardised and homogeneous system of local education. In fact, the research presented in this study suggests that there is no real *system* of local education in South Africa. Local education is not governed by common norms and standards, rules or regulations. It does not function as a single organism but comprises disparate geographic sub-structures in the country's nine provincial education departments that vary considerably in organisational design, size, shape, nomenclature, form and function. For example, the Mpumalanga and North West education departments have no 'districts' as such but do have regions and circuits, and regions and area project offices, respectively. The KwaZulu-Natal education department has circuits, districts and regions. (See sub-provincial organisational designs in Chapter 4.) Despite such incongruities, the use of the term 'districts' to describe local education has, since 1994, become ubiquitous in South African education discourse.

The term districts is used in the South African education system to describe geographical sub-units of provincial education departments that lie between schools and provincial head offices. It is an all-encompassing term, and its unproblematised use in South African education discourse is simplistic to the point of being misleading. Nevertheless, districts exhibit common features despite their diversity in organisational design and nomenclature.

Firstly, no provincial education sub-structure enjoys significant autonomy through the devolution of powers and functions from provincial education departments (DoE, 2003). No provincial sub-structure possesses original powers or authority in terms of provincial legislation, and none has been established as a tier of education governance. Officials in provincial sub-units are directly responsible to their respective provincial departments of education, and not to any elected local constituency or political authority. Provincial sub-structures do not enjoy the benefits of fiscal decentralisation. Thus, in Lauglo and McLean's (1985) typology, South African local education structures exhibit a low-level

form of administrative decentralisation, namely, deconcentration of functions from the provincial centre (see Conclusion to Chapter 5). Local education in South Africa, therefore, reflects two opposing, but co-existing characteristics. While it is diverse in organisational design and nomenclature, it reflects a similar form of spatial decentralisation.

Secondly, owing to their deconcentrated organisational status, provincial sub-structures reflect a common rationale and purpose. They promote state authority in the field (Lauglo & McLean, 1985) by facilitating the dispersal of responsibilities for certain services from the centre to branch offices (MwaAfrica, 1993) and by permitting officials appointed by the centre to be posted to the field to act as government representatives (see Litvack, 1998, and the discussion of policy fidelity in Chapters 6 and 7). Local education in South Africa is therefore dualistic in form and meaning: it is simultaneously heterogeneous and analogous, and cannot be assigned a singular meaning.

One can conclude that the *system* of local education in South Africa is a mirage, since it does not exist as a single organism but rather *appears* as one, on account of its generic form as deconcentrated units of provincial education departments.

8.3 Continuities and discontinuities in South African local education

Explanations for the dualistic character of local education in South Africa are rooted in the inherited apartheid system as well as in the actions and inactions of the post-apartheid government.

An explanation can be offered for the diversity of the South African education sub-system: there has been no formal policy on the specification of district design and organisation since 1994. In addition, the ANC's ambiguous and vague proposals on local-level education in the run-up to the 1994 elections provided little or no direction to the new provincial education departments, and the new Department of Education did not act to fill the gap. Consequently, provinces, left to their own devices, developed their sub-provincial organisational designs along different tracks.

The existence of common features in South African local education, on the other hand, can be attributed mainly to the continued momentum of apartheid structures. As Chapter 4 concludes, it was the continuance of apartheid formations into the post-1994 period that lent a semblance of ‘uniformity’ to the new education sub-system. The 19 education departments of the then apartheid education system comprised sub-divisions such as regions and circuits, which were deconcentrated administrative units of their respective departments. The post-1994 system continued to draw on the administrative structures of the apartheid era to ensure the smooth delivery of education services, and hesitated to overhaul them in a climate of competing demands for change during the first few years of the political transition. (See reference to the need for continuity in education service delivery, Chapter 4.)

The continuity of apartheid formations into the post-1994 education system is not surprising, bearing in mind Archer’s (1985:3) assertion that, ‘once a given form of education exists, it exerts an influence on future educational change’. Archer (1979:790) also foretells that new education systems often retain the main features of their inheritance, and claims that ‘the products of change will reproduce the main features of centralisation or decentralisation’. Archer’s thesis holds remarkably true in the South African context, as the present provincial sub-structures have a similar, if not the same, decentralised status as the sub-divisions of the apartheid education departments.

8.4 Why is there no formal policy on education districts in South Africa?

The reasons for the absence of a formal policy on education districts are multifarious. They are rooted in historical, constitutional, legal and political influences.

The Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) influenced the district discourse in three ways. Firstly by not allocating education functions to the local sphere of government (which the ANC had considered in its policy proposals for a post-apartheid education system),⁹⁶ it

⁹⁶ In its schedules of functional areas of concurrent national and provincial legislative competence, the Constitution (RSA, 1996) does not allocate any education functions to the sphere of local government. However, Section 126 of the Constitution does make it possible for a province to assign education functions to a Municipal Council. To date, though, as indicated in Chapter 3, no provinces have drawn on this clause to assign education functions to local government.

curtailed any aspirations for local government involvement in education. In this respect both the interim and final Constitutions (RSA 1996b) followed historical South African constitutional practice, since education had never been a local government responsibility. In this regard, education differs radically from the health service, since local authorities have long been responsible for certain aspects of this sector. It is not surprising, therefore, that the national primary health care system is now a district health system linked to local government, for which statutory District Health Councils are responsible (see Chapter 4).

Secondly, the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) placed the responsibility of provincialisation and provincial organisation on a number of provincial and national authorities that were required to work co-operatively. Provincial governments were empowered to establish Provincial Service Commissions for this purpose, subject to national norms and standards. The (national) Public Service Commission was empowered to give directions on the organisation and administration of departments. The President had special transitional authority to rationalise the public administration by means of a Proclamation ratified by Parliament (see Chapter 4). In the event, the national government focused on the establishment of national state departments and provincial Premier's departments, and left the internal organisation of provincial administrations to the provincial authorities (RSA, 1994). The Department of Education followed suit and adopted a 'hands off' approach to local-level education despite being encouraged to consider local governance of schools by the *Report of the Committee to Review the Organisation, Governance and Funding of Schools* (DoE, 1995b). It was an expedient interpretation at the time, as the DoE had its hands full macro-managing the unification of the 19 racially and ethnically-based education departments into a single, non-racial education system. This involved dealing closely with the fledgling provincial departments, while keeping learning institutions functional. Moreover, transferring assets and people from apartheid structures to post-1994 formations were uppermost in the Department's mind, not the shape of sub-provincial administration (see Chapter 4).

Thirdly, the Interim Constitution contained "special measures" designed to protect, at least temporarily, the rights of self-governing schools, one of the last compromises to be negotiated between the incumbent white government and the mass democratic movement. Thus any incipient interest there may have been in local-level education governance was submerged in the intense concentration needed by the new education departments and

their political leaders to negotiate new rights and obligations for a non-racial South African school system (see reference to Section 247 of the Interim Constitution in Chapter 3). Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992:41) point out that internationally there are often tensions about whether the unit of local control should be at the school level or with the local community. Clearly, in this instance the provisions of the Interim Constitution deflected contemplation by the national government on local-level governance and administration, and instead diverted attention to school-level governance.

Moreover, unlike school governance, where political temperatures ran high, there was no local education lobby and hence no political impulse impelling the centre to focus on local education structures. Despite the policy options set out in the NEPI (1992) report and the ANC's (1994) own tentative policy proposal in favour of a local tier of governance in education, it appears that government simply found it prudent to continue with existing organisational forms of 'local education' to ensure the continued delivery of education services to schools, instead of initiating a new policy that might have severely disrupted an already crisis-ridden and change-overloaded education system.

The final Constitution (RSA, 1996b) does not preclude national government from developing norms, standards, frameworks or even policy on matters of provincial organisation. (Chapter 4 provides an interpretation of the Constitution in this regard.) Furthermore, the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996a) empowers the Minister of Education to determine policy on matters related to the organisation, management and governance of the national education system. Several prominent South African educationists (Godden & Maurice, 2000; Taylor *et al.*, 2003) have advocated the creation of a legislative framework that spells out the roles, powers and functions of education districts. However, senior officials of the Department of Education (Interview, Boshoff, 2003) and external legal experts (Interview, Malherbe, 2003) advance constitutional and legal arguments to explain why it has not happened and should not happen. They argue that the administrative arrangements of provincial departments remain the prerogative and legal responsibility of provincial governments, not the national government, and that education districts cannot be legislated for since they are administrative and not governance entities. They contend that if districts were to be established through general legislation rather than administrative decision, they would require original powers with an original budget, and would consequently be subject to public oversight rather than

administrative direction by the provincial government. This implies the creation of an additional level of governance for which the Constitution does not provide. The district health system created by the National Health Act of 2003 stands in contradiction to this line of reasoning, and reinforces the conclusion that national and provincial education authorities (and local governments, for that matter) have shown no interest in a statutory district education system because there is no South African precedent for it and no political incentive to create it.

The establishment of organisational sub-divisions, therefore, remains a matter of operational choice for provincial education departments, in line with the provisions of the Public Service Act (RSA, 1994). Education districts in South Africa are legitimated through the adoption by the provincial legislature of the provincial strategic plan (which includes the organisational design of the provincial education department). Curiously, however, while provincial organograms spell out the purpose and functions of the different components of the district office, they do not spell out the purpose, role and functions of the district office as such. As pointed out in Chapter 5, this gap explains why educationists have continued to call for greater clarity on the roles, powers and functions of districts. The current legal requirements, in particular those of the PSA (RSA, 1994), appear to fall short of committing provincial education departments to provide a rationale and holistic vision of their sub-divisions to the public. But there do not appear to be legal obstacles to provinces making available such a framework and, if presented, it would certainly contribute towards demystifying the legal status of districts, as well as their roles, functions and powers.

Moreover, the constitutional and legal arguments advanced by government officials and legal experts for a ‘hands off’ approach by national government towards provincial organisation do not appear to be entirely convincing and, as demonstrated in Chapter 4, are rather circular. In reality, the government does have an array of options from which it could, if it so desired, select a legal route to intervene in matters of provincial organisation (see Chapter 4 for constitutional provisions that facilitate this). Its reluctance to do so at this stage could possibly be attributed to the organisational momentum already established in provinces, and apprehension that interference from the centre may destabilise the fragile provincial education departments (see reference to restructuring in provincial education departments in Chapter 4).

Practical arguments advanced by stakeholders (see Chapter 4) against a policy on local-level education point to the vastly different dynamics in provinces with respect to their geographical space, their financial capacity, the types of schools that dominate their education systems, and their own priorities and interests. Such arguments are based on the understanding that the imposition of a single model from the centre would lead to provincial sub-systems that do not reflect the realities of provinces. However, as pointed out in Chapter 4, it is not uncommon to find single models of local education systems in countries that experience similar diverse conditions. Moreover, the government has imposed other central policies, such as those on school governance and curriculum, on the same 'diverse' system, and such arguments have not carried a similar weight in these instances. Hence the pragmatic position does not, on its own, explain why there is no policy on local-level education in South Africa. It does, however, partially explain the government's reluctance to establish a single system of local education in the country.

8.5 Should there be a national policy on districts?

An explanation for the absence of official policy on education districts in South Africa is not an argument for having one. Given the importance of districts in promoting school improvement (see Chapter 2), a key question is whether a uniform education sub-system, which the homogenising influence of national policy would undoubtedly promote, would advance or retard quality education service delivery in the South African context?⁹⁷

Education change theory builds on evidence which suggests that restructuring on its own (without the benefits of reculturing and other efforts) cannot bring about significant improvement in the education system (Fullan, 1998). Elmore (1993a) argues that restructuring seldom touches the core of education activity, namely, teaching and learning. Hence attempts to restructure the South African education landscape, particularly at a time when there is already change or reform overload in the system, are unlikely to solve the problem of effective education service delivery. While greater uniformity in provincial sub-systems may solve problems related to incoherence in national debate, and could contribute towards greater equity in the system, a single model

⁹⁷ Levinson and Sutton (2001) caution, however, that policy is not necessarily implemented in a linear way, but is appropriated by implementing agencies to suit their own contexts.

may not automatically lead to a higher quality of education service. Attempts to develop a single national organisational model for local-level education at this stage would place restructuring at the centre of education activity and destabilise provincial education departments, which over the past five years have been constantly engaged in their own restructuring exercises. It seems prudent, at least for now, for the Education Minister to allow provincial systems to evolve, and to develop country-wide coherence through other mechanisms such as national dialogue, guidelines, frameworks, capacity building of district officials and non-obligatory standards of district performance.

A related question in this debate is whether it is desirable to create a local level of *governance* in the education system. This is a crucial matter, as any policy initiative on districts would undoubtedly consider governance issues given the importance attached to public participation by the ANC (1994), and the continued advocacy for district-level governance by opinion-formers like the Review Committee on School Governance (DoE, 2004). Would a governance structure at the local level of the system lead to an improvement in education service delivery? Tyack (1993:24) argues that ‘changes in governance have generally failed to alter basic patterns of instruction’. He cautions that ‘we should not assume that through reform of governance ... the old will evaporate; it seems more likely that accommodation to new demands will complicate, not simplify matters’. In the context of policy overload, it is reasonable to assume that the creation of a local level of education governance would divert attention, resources and energy away from the core function of education service delivery. It is highly unlikely, therefore, that the addition of an intermediary layer of governance in the education system would necessarily lead to improved education service delivery, even if it enhanced local participation in education decision making.

The functioning of districts is not constrained solely by the absence of a national district policy. Among the multitude of factors that prevent districts from being effective are the tensions inherent in their role. Such contradictions are not confined to the South African context, but reflect the problems facing supervisory services world-wide (Carron & De Grauwe, 1997). One such dichotomy facing districts is the dual role they play in supporting schools while supervising them.

8.6 (Un)managing the dichotomy between support and pressure

The knowledge base on school change and improvement demonstrates a growing consensus that both support and pressure levers are essential for school improvement (Fullan, 2005; Elmore, 2005; Taylor *et al.*, 2003; IIEP, 2000; Darling-Hammond, 1998; OECD, 1995). As Taylor *et al.* (2003:5) point out,

there is a growing realisation that a systematically constructed combination of accountability and support measures is required to break the very poor record, internationally and in South Africa, of success in improving poorly functioning sections of the school system.

Pressure without support is said to lead to short-term gains (Fleisch, 2002a), resistance, alienation (Fullan, 2001) and conflict. It does not impact directly on teaching and learning (Fleisch, 2002a), and according to Elmore (2002) pressure measures have ‘a habit of mutating into caricatures of themselves’. Analysts of the Organisation of Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, 1995) also question the point of identifying problems through pressure mechanisms such as inspections and evaluations if there are no external support measures to help resolve them.

On the other hand, support without pressure is said to be inefficient (Fullan, 2002) and, according to Fleisch (2002a), often leads to complacency, slow progress and low standards. Elmore (2002) argues that support without pressure lacks direction, focus and coherence and cannot lead to quality gains. Writing from his experience of South African education, Taylor (2003) observes that existing training programmes and other support measures are not effective because trainees are free to decide whether or not to implement the lessons of the training. Fleisch (2002a:95), too, believes that improvement projects in South Africa ‘often do not have the right mix of incentives and sanctions to translate support into new practice’.

The dominant discourse on the role of districts in South Africa places them as support centres for schools (Prew, 2003; DoE, 2000). Even the monitoring role of districts is viewed as being geared towards school improvement rather than school inspection. However, this study has found that policy issues dominate district functions. Policy

transmission, policy compliance and what I term ‘policy alleviation’⁹⁸ (a process where district officials attempt to ‘soften’ the rough edges of policy effects on schools) occupy a significant segment of district-school interactive spaces.

In addition, administrative matters such as staffing, examinations and data gathering, and management issues such as labour relations and conflict mediation engage much of the time and energy of district officials. The pedagogical concerns of schools occupy a less prominent space in school-district interactions.

Much of the often claimed pedagogical support provided by district officials centres on training large groups of teachers about the new curriculum, rather than mentoring or subject-based support for individual or small groups of teachers. That is probably why most principals complain about the poor quality of curriculum training programmes (see Chapter 5). Even clusters, which are intended to serve as forums of peer learning, lean towards being instruments of administrative control rather than sources of curriculum problem solving. In her study of GDE districts, De Clerq (2002:3) concludes that schools rarely experience district support as a response to their own problems and needs; instead they tend to regard district officials as being more committed to policy compliance.

While support and pressure remain a central point of departure for the role of districts, stakeholders unveil a multiplicity of metaphors in describing their perceptions of the role of districts (see Chapter 7). A dominant image of districts is that of *passive mediators* between schools and the Provincial Head Office. More charitable descriptions characterise districts as *go-betweens*, *channels of communication*, *stations*, and *policy-transmitters*. Less benevolent descriptions cast districts as mere *messengers* and *post boxes*. These metaphors cast district offices in a passive role. District officials find this role expedient, as they are often bearers of GDE directives and policies that are not always particularly palatable to schools. Their plea to schools not to *shoot the messenger* suggests a survivalist outlook, as it eases the effects of school responses to the messages they carry. The messenger role of districts partially explains why they are not perceived as being a threat to schools, and why they enjoy a relatively friendly relationship with schools. However, several stakeholders are not altogether satisfied with this type of role for districts. They argue that districts should not only cascade information to schools, or

⁹⁸ Not to be confused with *poverty* alleviation (!), presently a dominant discourse in South African government.

serve as facilitation agents, but should provide active support and guidance.

In practice, however, districts are not entirely passive transmitters. They play a significant role in ensuring that schools implement and adhere to policy. In this regard, several other stakeholders perceive districts as *foot soldiers*, and *the arms and legs of policy makers*. This perception derives from the considerable attention directed by district officials to monitoring and supervisory activities. Hence the metaphor of districts as *aggressive monitoring agents* (Elmore, 1993b) also holds true in the case of districts in South Africa.

Not only do districts passively transmit policy and aggressively monitor its implementation, but they occasionally actively explain and defend policy (see Chapter 6). They are thus often called upon to play the role of *policy alleviators* in their attempts to soften policy's effects on schools.

The role of districts as *bridges* between schools and communities, and between racially divided schools, has also found a place in this study, albeit more as an intention than a reality. Stakeholders do not believe that districts currently serve as centres of community development, as there are limited links between districts and the broader community, and between districts and other government agencies. Indeed the study reveals that district officials rarely interact with other government departments, and only the sports unit of the district office maintains close contact with local government structures. Structures like the District Education and Training Council (DETC) are not an effective medium through which districts can forge closer links with the community, as they are viewed as being 'paper tigers' (see comment by IDS co-ordinator in Chapter 6). However, the district office does bridge the gap between racially divided schools through cluster meetings, teacher exchange programmes and educator development activities.

Stakeholders do not believe that districts currently serve as active support bases of schools (Elmore, 1993b:120). While schools expect their mission and work to be the central concern of the district office, provincial and district officials thrust policy compliance and fidelity to the forefront. Clearly, there is a discrepancy between school expectations of districts and what districts actually do (see reference to Prawda, 1992, in Chapter 1). The misalignment between roles and expectations leads to false hopes on the part of schools about what districts can offer them, and undoubtedly creates tensions

regarding the role of districts. These tensions are not unexpected, given Simkins' (2000) assertion that the natural condition of public organisations is a state of tension, as they struggle to maintain the integrity of each of the domains of policy, management and service that operate simultaneously within their organisations.

It is useful to revert to how district roles were mediated by the ANC and its allies before 1994. At the time, it was believed that districts would play a central role in deracialising and democratising education. In addition, much hope was placed on the redistributive role that districts could play in overcoming the historical legacy of inequity in resources such as sports facilities and skilled teachers (Karlsson *et al.*, 1996). This study reveals that districts play a minimal role in the redistribution of resources, as there is little evidence that the facilities and resources of advantaged schools are made available to disadvantaged schools. In addition, districts are unable to play a significant role in the redistribution of skilled teachers, as decisions about the staffing of schools reside largely with the Provincial Head Office and school governing bodies. ANC aspirations for a strong democratisation role at the district level of the system have not been met, as there are no governance structures with significant powers at this level. The DETCs and LETUs of the GDE are merely consultative bodies and, as explained earlier, exist largely on paper. However, districts do play an important deracialising role between schools (rather than within schools) through clusters and the provision of capacity-building programmes.

Evidence from the data derived from district officials about the nature of their work suggests that they spend much of their time on administrative, monitoring, and policy compliance activities, rather than school development activities derived from the problems of schools themselves. The agenda and programmes of district officials derive more from the 'top' than from the 'bottom'. Though district officials prefer spending more of their time and energy with school-driven needs rather than provincially or nationally driven agendas (see comments by district officials in Chapter 6), given that the district office is a deconcentrated unit of provincial head office, they have little choice but to accede to provincial and national directives. Hence, despite the progressive rhetoric around the school-level support functions of districts, the focus and function of these units tend to serve the immediate managerial interests of the provincial education departments, whether these are significant or trivial.

8.7 Is fear of the district office now history?

An unexpected finding of the study is the remarkably amicable, collegial and healthy relationship that exists between schools and district officials, despite the oft-expressed vexation of principals and teachers towards what they consider to be the poor quality of professional support provided by district officials. The positive relationship between schools and districts is even more surprising given the strong role of district officials in monitoring policy compliance in schools and the historical baggage that districts carry from the apartheid era (see Chapter 3).

Undoubtedly, districts have turned around previously held suspicions and fears of bureaucratic and administrative authority. Moreover, they have succeeded in overcoming the overwhelming antagonism and negativity that characterised school-district relations in the apartheid era.

The political legitimacy of the post-apartheid government probably explains in part why districts are not considered as 'enemies' by schools, as was the case in the apartheid era. More importantly, though, the discourses of transparency, participation, democracy, support and service delivery that currently inform the approach of education departments to schools (Fleisch, 2002a) have impacted positively on district-school relations. Moreover, the highly visible presence of district officials in schools (see reference to school visits by district officials in Chapter 6) also contributes to the positive image of districts in schools. As De Grauwe and Varghese (2000:18) point out, internationally the number of visits to schools by district officials is often used as a key measure of evaluating district performance, as it reflects district interest in schools. Undoubtedly, positive school-district interactions are to a large extent dependent on the personality, commitment, experience and competence of district officials. This study found that attributes such as empathy, tolerance and open-mindedness have been crucial in eliciting the trust of schools, and in minimising school negativity towards the district office and the GDE in general.

The positive relationship between schools and district officials could be threatened, however, if the balance of support versus pressure activities of districts swings too strongly towards monitoring and policy compliance, instead of school-responsive support

activities. The activities of district officials reveals that there is already danger of this occurring, as they are often obliged to respond to provincial imperatives rather than school-driven needs. The positive relationship between districts and schools could also be tempered as a result of numerous challenges hampering districts efforts to deliver services effectively to schools.

8.8 Challenges facing districts in service delivery

Though the South African literature is replete with information regarding the challenges facing districts (De Clerq, 2001; Roberts, 2001; Chinsamy, 1999; Mphahlele, 1999), much of this focuses on resources and organisational efficiency. This study argues that a combination of structural, organisational and resource challenges prohibit districts from providing effective services to schools.

Given their status as deconcentrated administrative units of provincial education departments, GDE district officials acquire their authority not through general legislation but through delegations. The instrument of delegations allows for *functions* to be transferred from senior provincial-level officials to officials in districts. It does not allow for *responsibilities* to be transferred, thus constraining the hand of provincial officials in the nature and extent of their delegations, particularly in financial matters. In addition, delegated functions are not transferred permanently, and can be conferred or withdrawn at the whim of the delegating authority. Indeed, over the past decade many districts have often been subjected to major adjustments and modifications to their functions and authority (DoE, 2003). When the GDE eliminated regions from its organisational landscape it handed over key administrative functions to districts, only to remove them and pass them on to the GSSC when it was established (see Chapters 5 and 7). Districts were destabilised by the experience, and this attenuated their efforts to provide effective and efficient services to schools. In fact, there is little evidence to demonstrate that such frequent shifts in functions from one part of the system to the other have enabled the GDE to deliver better services to schools (see comments by district officials in Chapter 5). De Clerq (2002:2) argues that far from improving services, as was intended, restructuring created new tensions and problems while leaving others unsolved. Fleisch (2002a) also believes that there was little evidence of change in the practices of the GDE after its restructuring initiatives (see Chapters 4 and 5).

The randomness and arbitrary manner in which delegations occur is also a bone of contention for districts, as the necessary resources often do not accompany delegated functions (see DoE, 2003, and comments by the District Director in Chapter 6). Ironically, such concerns mirror the frequent complaint by provincial governments about the practice of unfunded mandates by national government departments. In addition, district officials are frequently unclear about their authority to act on several important matters pertaining to schools, leaving them susceptible to legal action from school governing bodies and teacher unions. Moreover, the mechanism adopted by provincial education departments to confer delegated authority to district officials lacks legal rigour, resulting in education departments often having to defend district officials in court (see reference to the experiences of the District Director in Chapter 5).

Prawda (1992) points to the importance of defining clearly the roles, functions and operational mechanisms for decentralised structures, as evidence worldwide indicates that no system can last for long if decentralised units are incapable of absorbing new responsibilities and implementing them effectively. In this regard, besides the problem of poor material resources, an important finding of this study is that there is no clamour on the part of district officials for a fundamental shift in power relations between districts and the provincial head office (see reference to powers and functions of districts in Chapter 5). While there are specific areas in which district officials would prefer greater authority to act (for example, the facilitation of repairs and maintenance in schools), districts are not lobbying for major alterations to their overall existing powers and authority. Hence any future consideration of a higher level of decentralisation to the district level needs to take into account Bjork's (2002) contention that decentralisation is effective only if the necessary cultural and ideological conditions exist at the lower levels of the system. As Bjork (2002) points out, decentralisation policies would only work if they are accompanied by initiatives that bring about cultural, ideological and behavioural changes among those at the lower level of the system. In the case of education districts in South Africa, it is apparent that district officials are not ideologically driven towards a struggle for greater autonomy.

In their discussion of the 'six pillars of performance' for district offices, Maurice and Godden (2000:26) argue that for districts to be effective, the functional divisions of the

provincial head office must be replicated at the district level. At present this is not the case. Instead, provinces have a weighty structure at the provincial head office and a comparatively leaner organisation at the district level. Hence a relatively smaller number of staff members are expected to carry forward programmes and activities initiated by a larger complement of specialised staff based at the PHO. The lack of alignment in functional divisions between the district office and the PHO not only creates work overload at the district level but compromises quality of service delivery, as district office staff often do not possess the knowledge and skills of their specialised counterparts at the PHO.

While GDE districts are blessed with a reasonable staff complement compared to other provinces (DoE, 2003a), the numbers remain insufficient to provide the effective and efficient professional and administrative support to schools that they are expected to deliver. However, the recent tweaking of the GDE organogram paves the way for additional staff to be deployed for curriculum support services to schools, and future studies will be able to reveal whether this has improved service delivery.

In principle, though, greater staff numbers alone do not guarantee district effectiveness. Schools have drawn attention to the poor quality of services provided by district staff, particularly in the areas of curriculum and management support (see references by principals and teachers to poor-quality training provided by district officials in Chapter 5). District staff are fairly highly qualified but relatively few have sufficient experience in, for example, school management or specific subject areas to provide the support the schools need. In addition, few district officials have been at the sharp end in schools, implementing policy changes since 1994. The capacity of district officials to support schools is thus compromised as they have limited familiarity with education transformation initiatives such as the new arrangements on school governance and funding, racial desegregation, human rights and, most importantly, the curriculum. Malcolm (1999) argues that district officials should adopt new approaches to teacher development that match the new learner-centred curriculum. However, given that the majority of district officials lack first-hand experience in post-1994 schools, it is questionable whether district officials, even with the help of effective district capacity-building programmes, will be able to support schools in dealing with the challenges of education transformation. This may be corrected with the passage of time and the

movement of school-based educators to office-based positions.

For now, however, it is perhaps more useful for districts to concentrate their efforts on facilitating networking, co-operation and peer learning between teachers and principals instead of creating expectations about the 'expertise' of their professional services. Indeed, the GDE has initiated a system of clusters for both principals and teachers, with the former in mind. However, as Chapter 6 demonstrates, these clusters are threatened by resistance from teachers, as they might easily be perceived as instruments of control rather than networks of support. De Grauwe and Varghese (2000:18), citing the experience of other countries, warn that it would be easy for the cluster system to develop into a new administrative layer because of the demands of higher-level authorities.

Godden and Maurice (2000) identify the availability of resources as being a key 'pillar of performance' for the effective functioning of district offices. Chapter 5 points out that the lack of operational office equipment remains a key obstacle to the capacity of district officials to undertake their tasks effectively. The dearth of computers, printers, fax machines and photocopying facilities, in combination with broken down e-mail systems and inadequate telephone lines, are a source of great frustration for district officials.

As Chapter 5 has demonstrated, constant change and restructuring has been a dominant feature of provincial education departments since 1994, resulting in much instability and volatility in the system. Such capriciousness compromises the ability of the district office to provide a steady flow of administrative and professional services to schools, thereby impeding the smooth management of schools. After a decade of restructuring exercises in provincial education departments, there is an obvious need for the system to reach at least a modicum of stability.

The challenges facing districts in promoting school improvement are indeed vast. However, this thesis argues that even if these obstacles were removed, the structural condition of districts hamper their ability to provide the professional services required by schools.

8.9 Beyond dichotomies?

This study has found that districts find their meanings at the centre of competing imperatives: the dichotomy between pressure and support, and the dichotomy between centralisation and decentralisation. Districts are expected to coalesce the dichotomy of support and pressure in their work with schools, while simultaneously straddling their role as deconcentrated field units of provincial head offices and as school support centres. The study concludes that the twin dichotomies of support and pressure, centralisation and decentralisation, are inseparable and reflect the central dilemma of districts.

As Mao Tse Tung (1955:43) explains in his treatise on contradictions,

one contradictory aspect cannot exist without the other.... They are on the one hand opposed to each other and on the other, they are interconnected, interpenetrating, interdependent ... and the contradictory aspects mutually sustain each other's existence.

In this vein, what is important about each element of the two dichotomies discussed above is not only its distinctiveness but its embeddedness.

Fullan (2005:175) too contends that support and pressure 'are not mutually exclusive in that some forms of accountability have elements of support, and some forms of support have elements of pressure or built-in accountability'. Thus the concepts of pressure and support are embedded rather than dichotomous, as they are interconnected and interdependent.

While pressure and support are two sides of the same coin, it is necessary to distinguish between how these interventions are *actually* experienced, and how they are *intended* to be experienced (see reference to intended measures of support and pressure by Fullan, 2005, Taylor *et al.*, 2003, and Fleisch, 2002, in Chapter 7). Currently, the dominant discourse of pressure and support reflects only the *intention* dimension and overlooks the *experiential* dimension. For example, while the capacity development of teachers is commonly understood as a measure of support, this study reveals that teachers themselves often find them burdensome (see comments by teachers and reference to the effects of clusters in Chapter 6). Moreover, policy is not necessarily an instrument of support as it is commonly presented in South African policy discourse, since it often imposes external mandates on schools that run counter to their internal cultures and processes (Elmore,

1993b). Such sharp contrasts are an inherent aspect of South Africa's political and educational transformation.

This study demonstrates that the hortatory discourse on the support role of districts reflects the state's intentions rather than what is experienced by the recipients. By accepting the distinctiveness and embeddedness of these two concepts, as well as the state's *intentions* and the schools' own *experience*, districts will be in a better position to strategise the nature of their interventions for school improvement.

The application of pressure and support levers by districts to bring about school change and improvement is reinforced by the structural relationship between districts and the Provincial Head Office. As deconcentrated field units of the PHO, districts have no authority over policy decisions and are primarily accountable to the Provincial Head Office rather than schools. Hence they are inherently compelled to look more to the 'top' than to the 'bottom' for the formulation of their interventions in schools. To expect districts to serve exclusively as support centres for schools, therefore, is to be both naïve and romantic. The best that districts can do is attempt to balance the contending demands from the 'top' and the 'bottom', which, Fullan and Watson (2000:59) recognise as 'an obviously tough call' (see Chapter 2).

In practice, district offices are presently balanced precariously between the dichotomies of support and pressure on the one hand, and centralisation and decentralisation on the other. The study demonstrates that there is a real threat that they will fall on the side of pressure and the province. If the tensions between the domains of policy, management and service (Simkins, 2000) are not managed well and balanced appropriately, districts could easily revert to being perceived as instruments of administrative control rather than sources of school support. The Department of Education and provincial education departments could avoid falling into this trap by relaxing their strictures on policy fidelity and instead promoting a district ethos that is more responsive to the needs of schools. In doing so, they could provide enabling conditions for districts to maintain a careful balance between their roles as field offices of provinces, and as support centres for schools.

District education offices in South Africa reflect features of all three district models

proposed by Malcolm (1999): bureaucratic, market and community (see Chapter 1). They match the bureaucratic model, as they play a crucial role in passing down policies from head office and monitoring compliance (see reference to districts as foot soldiers and arms and legs of policy-makers in Chapter 7). As messengers of provincial education departments in passive engagement with schools, they reflect the market model (see reference to districts also as channels of communication and go-betweens in Chapter 7). However, districts are also empathetic and supportive of schools (see reference to school visit in Chapter 6), hence they reflect a community model. Which aspect dominates in practice is determined to a large extent by agency factors, such as the personality of district officials, their commitment to school improvement, their understanding of their position in relation to schools and the provincial head office, and the skills, knowledge and experience they bring to their work. In addition, contextual factors such as the 'season' of the work schedule of districts (see section on the work of district officials in Chapter 6), as well as new policy initiatives emanating from the centre, influence which features are dominant at any one time.

8.10 Implications of this study for future research

One of the drivers for continuing research in this area is the changing education policy environment in South Africa. For example, it is important to track the effects of the Department of Education's intention to develop national norms and standards for districts which, in its strategic plans for 2005-2010, it lists as one of its performance measures – the formulation of norms and standards 'for quality of district delivery based on district data' (DoE, 2005).

Government rhetoric on integrated service delivery and seamless local government, as well as pronouncements by senior government officials (see comments by Hindle on the role of local government in education in Chapter 7) suggest that local government involvement in education is far from being off the political agenda. Proposals that local government bear some responsibility for matters such as school sport and school maintenance are not totally unfeasible (see responses by Davies and Boshoff in Chapter 7). Indisputably, therefore, research into a role for local government in education is a crucial dimension of the study on districts as it has implications for a possible convergence in governance between education districts and those of local government.

The vexing question about the governance of local education is another area in which much more research is required. The readiness of districts, both in terms of capacity and willingness to absorb additional powers and functions related to governance is questionable and requires careful investigation. In addition, tensions between the goals of equity on the one hand and democracy on the other need to be explored with a view to assessing the possible effects of improved local governance in the system.

Further research can be undertaken in other provinces to investigate how districts play out their role in practice, particularly how they walk the tightrope of support and pressure. For example, quantitative surveys to explore school-district and district-provincial relationships will undoubtedly provide a more generalisable picture of districts. In addition, longitudinal case studies of several districts could point to changes that are occurring in the system, as well as corroborate or challenge the predictions of this study.

8.11 Conclusion

This study contributes in several ways to the existing knowledge base on education policy in general and education districts in particular.

Policy inaction on the part of the state is a useful addition to the existing repertoire of tools for policy analysis. It provides another point of reference for analysing education systems and offers a new explanation for the existence or persistence of current features in education. More specifically, the study suggests that policy inaction prevents the creation of homogeneous systems and inadvertently permits pre-existing organisational forms to inform the evolution of new structures and processes in a system.

A further contribution of this study to the existing knowledge base on education districts is the recognition that the natural condition of deconcentrated units is their primary obligation to higher levels of authority, rather than commitment to the favoured ideal of school support. Given that the agenda of education districts is set principally by provincial head offices rather than schools, it would be simplistic to expect districts to endorse a support role that is determined solely by schools. Districts' priorities are set from the top down, rather than from the bottom up, so it is fanciful to suppose that

districts should serve *primarily* as support bases for schools. However, one should resist determinism. This study does not suggest that districts cannot play a role as support centres to schools. Rather, it argues for district offices to engage in conscious reflection of the niche they occupy in the education system and a pragmatic consideration of the implications this has for their role. Future research in this area could explore how that niche evolves over time, particularly in the context of continuing policy shifts, as well as how districts traverse the dual dichotomies of pressure and support on the one hand, and centralisation and decentralisation on the other.

This study has also demonstrated that while existing understandings of the embeddedness of the concepts of pressure and support are constructive, they fail to distinguish between intended and experiential notions of these concepts. Pressure and support are not pre-determined, encoded concepts. Their meanings derive both from what they are intended to be, and how they are actually experienced. Further research in this area needs to conceptualise 'support' in both dimensions.

In practice, the central dilemma of education districts in South Africa is their structural condition. They operate at the intersection of the dual, related dichotomies of support and pressure, centralisation and decentralisation. Only through conscious engagement with these dichotomies, as well as by active, positive agency on district-school relationships, of the kind analysed in this study, will districts straddle, if not resolve, the tensions between the policy, support and management roles expected of them.