

THE INFLUENCE OF CIRCUIT MANAGERS ON LEARNER PERFORMANCE IN A THRIVING RURAL DISTRICT

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Abstract

The responsibility of education districts across contexts is to deliver multi-dimensional support towards teaching and learning. One of the dimensions through which the support is transmitted is the circuit management sub-directorate, which works closely with principals. Circuit managers are crucial in supporting principals in effectively leading teaching and learning. However, they have been overlooked in the literature. In this paper, we gaze at circuit managers of a thriving rural district in KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa, to understand their influence on learner academic performance in schools. To achieve this, we employed narrative inquiry, a qualitative methodology, to engage narratively with the lived experiences of purposefully sampled two circuit managers in a thriving district. Narrative ways of generating and analysing data were used. The study revealed four essential practices circuit managers exert to influence learner performance. These practices are directing intervention initiatives to all grades while not losing sight of Grade 12, direct involvement in monitoring learners' work, exposing principals to learning opportunities, and recognising and rewarding good performance. The participating circuit managers appeared to arm principals under their supervision with capacity and support so they could lead instruction in their respective schools. We, therefore, conclude that the circuit managers adopted an approach of working through and with principals to influence learner performance in schools.

Keywords: Circuit Management; District Leadership; Learner Performance; Narrative Inquiry; Teaching And Learning; Thriving Rural District.

Background

It has become common knowledge in the scholarship of education that leadership is critical to improving learner outcomes. Many studies on educational leadership have highlighted a connection between leaders' instructional practices and learner success (Honig & Rainey, 2015, 2019; Leithwood, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Naicker et al., 2013). While principals do not lead schools alone, their role is significant for success (Blose et al., 2022). These leaders are second after classroom teaching in supporting student learning (Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2013; Leithwood & Louis, 2011).

However, it has become increasingly complicated and challenging for school principals to focus on improving teaching and learning in the twenty-first century, as they are expected, among many other things, to foster staff development, parent involvement, community support and student growth (Mestry & Singh, 2007). They also endure increasing pressure from increased accountability for learning outcomes (Department of Basic Education [DBE], 2015; Fullan, 2019; Honig & Rainey, 2020). Principals require support to perform up to expectations, and the circuit managers, as their line managers, are the first source of such support (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Honig & Rainey, 2020; Mthembu, 2018).

Scholars such as Bantwini et al. (2017), Fullan (2007), Harris (2010) and Honig and Rainey (2015) have questioned the sole focus on school leadership if system-wide teaching and learning improvements should take place. The education districts are crucial to advancing quality education (Harris, 2010); they could play a pivotal role in reducing poor learner academic performance if they work closely and support school-based leaders (Fullan, 2007). This paper focuses on the circuit management sub-directorate, which directly supports schools as supervisors to principals. In South Africa, an education circuit is a district's management subunit responsible for all schools under its jurisdiction (RSA, 2013). According to the policy on the organisation, roles and responsibilities of education districts, "the circuit office is a field office of the district office headed by the Circuit Manager" (RSA, 2013, p. 25). The role of circuit managers involves providing management and administrative support to schools; they train principals, school management and School Governing Bodies [SGBs] (RSA, 2013).

Recent evidence suggests that circuit managers could be vital in taking effective education interventions and support to scale (Goldring et al., 2020; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2015, 2019; Thessin, 2019). However, their role has not received notable attention in the scholarship of educational leadership and has remained perplexing (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018; Chinsamy, 2013; Mthembu, 2018). In a study by Bantwini and Moorosi (2018), principals who participated expressed dissatisfaction with the low level of support from district officials, including circuit managers. These principals complained about inadequate resources, minimal consultation in critical evaluations involving their schools, and lack of visibility and responsiveness of district officials. Such findings show the need to examine the role of circuit managers. The study reported in this paper focused on these leaders to understand how they contribute to leading teaching and learning improvement initiatives for effective district-wide learner performance improvement. We deliberately chose circuit managers in a thriving rural district because we believed they contributed to its performance. The rural context in South Africa has many constraining realities, including, among others, a lack of resources, deficient parental interest in children's education, limited funding, underqualified educators, and multi-grade teaching (Du Plessis & Mestry, 2019). However, the district where this study was conducted maintains good learner academic performance to the extent that it outperforms some urban districts.

Hence, we decided to engage with the circuit managers of this district. The research puzzle we address in this paper is: How do circuit managers influence learner performance in a thriving district?

Why Circuit Managers' Leadership?

Circuit managers, also known as principal supervisors in other contexts, are line managers for school principals. They are educational leaders stationed in district offices across provinces and work directly with schools within their districts. The circuit managers' role in South Africa involves ensuring optimum curriculum delivery and enhanced learner performance. To this end, circuit managers should support schools and train principals (RSA, 2013). This view has been reiterated by many scholars, who affirm that circuit managers and other district officials can positively impact classrooms and schools if they pay attention to principals' support in leading teaching and learning improvement (Bantwini & Diko, 2011; Honig et al., 2010; Mavuso, 2013; Mthembu, 2018; Rorrer et al., 2008). While the support of principals is perceived as a key responsibility of circuit managers, research suggests that circuit managers, in practice, focus primarily on evaluating principals for compliance instead of supporting them to grow as instructional leaders (Bhengu et al., 2014; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Naicker et al., 2013). Such focus does not necessarily translate into systemic improvement of school performance (Elmore, 2003; Fullan, 2007; Harris, 2010; Mthembu, 2018).

Circuit managers must commit to supporting and developing principals as education leaders in schools (DuFour & Marzano, 2009; Goldring et al., 2018; Mthembu, 2018). However, this is not always possible in South Africa since circuit managers are often inadequately prepared to support school principals (Bantwini et al., 2017; Naicker et al., 2013). This view is supported by Bhengu et al. (2014) and Naicker et al. (2013), who found minimal support by circuit managers as a hindrance to schools and learner outcome improvement. It is, therefore, essential to explore the role of circuit managers and how they influence learner performance in schools.

District Leadership's Influence on Learner Performance

Given that circuit managers are a component of a district office, it is necessary to explore the district leadership generally. Across contexts, the research on district leadership (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Leithwood, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Mthembu et al., 2020; Rorrer et al., 2008) provides insights into the district officials' leadership roles in supporting teaching and learning. There are three dimensions to these issues recurring in the literature: the establishment of the district's vision statement, communicating the vision and goals, and the provision of instructional leadership, professional development and capacity (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Leithwood, 2013; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Rorrer et al., 2008).

Firstly, establishing the district vision statement is vital in improving teaching and learning in districts; it includes setting district goals or targets (Cobb & Jackson, 2011; DuFour & Marzano, 2011; Honig, 2012; Leithwood, 2013). Secondly, the vision must be communicated to the district offices, schools, and other stakeholders (Honig & Rainey, 2015; Knapp et al., 2014; Leithwood & Louis, 2011; Marzano & Waters, 2009; Mthembu et al., 2020). This way, all stakeholders will embrace and possibly run with the vision. Thirdly, district officials should provide differentiated and targeted support to principals, including professional development opportunities and instructional leadership development. These are necessary for schools to improve learner performance (Honig & Rainey, 2019; Rorrer et al., 2008; Sharratt & Fullan, 2009).

Apart from the three dimensions, practices promoted by researchers are assumed to improve teaching and learning; this includes the use of data for learning progress, developing cooperative values and professional education for teachers and leaders, and promoting district and community partnerships (Cawelti & Protheroe, 2007; Honig, 2012; Marsh & Farrell, 2015). According to Honig et al. (2010), all employees in the district office should significantly orient their work toward supporting school improvement. They assert this is possible when district offices participate “productively in teaching and learning improvement, capacity for high-quality teaching and expanding students’ opportunities to learn” (Honig et al., 2010, p. 118). In contrast, some studies expose that most district office units operate in silos and lack coherence, with some lacking interest in teaching and learning (Fullan & Quinn, 2016; Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014). This finding resonates with what Naicker and Mestry (2015) found in their study exploring leadership capacity for principals and district officials. Naicker and Mestry’s (2015) study exposed inadequate collaboration between principals and district officials and among principals. These researchers recommended the establishment of professional learning communities (PLCs) and networks between district officials, principals and teaching staff to “speed up system-wide change towards learner performance” (Naicker & Mestry, 2015, p. 1).

As indicated in this paper, the association between schools and circuit managers is crucial, given that they are supervisors to principals. Circuit managers are expected to establish relationships that lay the groundwork for robust transformations in practice. Honig (2012) refers to this relationship as joint work. In a joint work relationship, principals will likely acquire new instructional leadership practices from their circuit managers (Honig, 2012). Goldring et al. (2020) support this view and propose reducing the extent of their control so that circuit managers spend more time with principals and develop better and more productive relationships with them. They assert:

This change in the nature of the relationships between principals and supervisors was due not only to the quantity of time spent together but also to the qualitative shift in the nature of their interactions toward a greater focus on instructional leadership (p. xiii).

Conceptual Framework

This study adopted Honig et al.'s (2017) conception of district instructional leadership to understand circuit managers' influence on learner performance; these scholars developed an approach to understanding the instructional leadership role of district officials. Their research spanned more than a decade in districts of various contexts and sizes to strengthen their district central offices as centres of educational equity and learner outcomes improvement (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019, 2020; Honig et al., 2017).

This framework recognises and focuses on the need for principals to grow as instructional leaders to improve teaching and learning. Honig and Rainey (2020), Honig (2012), Honig and Rainey (2014) and Honig et al. (2017) conceptualise district instructional leadership as an approach to teaching and learning centred on how principals' supervisors (known as circuit managers in South Africa) work with principals to enhance instructional leadership. The framework postulates practices that develop principals' instructional leadership. These are fostering learner agency, focusing on joint work, modelling, diversity and brokering. According to Honig (2012), these practices contrast with traditional district supervisory interactions where district office staff monitor principals for policy compliance but do not get involved in school improvement themselves. The five leadership practices are briefly discussed below.

Focus on Joint Work

Honig (2012; Honig & Rainey, 2014, 2019) theorises that district leaders, particularly circuit managers in this instance, can assist in expanding principals' participation in their work practices as they engage in instructional leadership in their schools. Circuit managers sustain principals' engagement in ways essential to progression since learners are more likely to join in activities they view as crucial or whose importance is reinforced by their social or cultural contexts. This is possible if the district leaders' participation focuses on 'joint work'. 'Joint work' distinctly contrasts traditional supervisory or 'assessment relationships' (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Tharp & Gallimore, 1991). In the latter, the district office might require principals to improve their instructional management and mainly assess the principals' progress. However, if they consider a joint work approach, circuit managers and other district office personnel can work with the principals and view the improvements as the achievement of a collective (Honig, 2012; Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Fostering Learner Agency

Honig and Rainey (2020) suggest that principal supervisors use a teaching and learning approach to support them by fostering the principals' agency as learners. This includes moves that progressively develop principals to function with autonomy and agency in leading their schools.

Circuit managers support principals to reflect on their expertise in developing new practices. Also, they focus on school principals to develop and implement their professional learning (Honig & Rainey, 2020). It is acknowledged that principal supervisors are key mentors who reinforce principals' agency through ongoing support and monitoring of their learning (Honig, 2012).

Modelling

Principal supervisors model and demonstrate leadership tasks required by principals through mentorship. For example, principal supervisors model how they could have "challenging conversations" with their teachers, where principals use "talk moves" (Honig, 2012, p. 751; Horn & Little, 2010).

Differentiation

Differentiation highlights digressing from the one-size-fits-all to distinguish support for school principals according to their needs. Circuit managers differentiate support based on evidence to understand specific support needs and how support varies according to contexts (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Brokering

Brokering actions can connect individuals in a school (e.g., principals) to district office resources or protect them from district demands (Honig, 2012). This could be through bridging, wherein circuit managers support principals and school leadership teams by strategically using activities that use new ideas, knowledge, and other means "that might advance learning" (Honig, 2012, p. 740). Also, circuit managers could buffer relationships from potentially unproductive external interruptions, which is vital in the complex workings of school principals (Honig & Rainey, 2020).

Methodology

This research is located within the interpretivism paradigm to examine circuit managers' experiences. The interpretivism paradigm centres on the assumption that people construct subjective meanings of their personal experiences; these meanings vary from one individual to another, leading to multiple realities (Creswell & Poth, 2018). For this reason, we paid special attention to each participant's experiences and how the meanings they attach to their individual experiences may be dissimilar to others. In keeping with interpretivism, the narrative inquiry methodology, described by Clandinin (2013) as a way to inquire into individuals' experiences narratively, over time, and in context, was utilised. This methodology allowed us to engage qualitatively with the participants' lived experiences. This methodology assumes that people live storied lives and share those stories (Nieuwenhuis, 2020). Hence, we generated storied experiences from circuit managers in this study to understand their viewpoints on how their work influences learner performance improvement in schools.

The two circuit managers were suitable for this study since they constitute the circuit management sub-directorates and have first-hand experience and in-depth and valuable insights regarding the studied phenomenon (Subedi, 2021). Therefore, two circuit managers in a thriving rural district were purposively sampled (one circuit manager was sampled from each circuit). Given this district's excellent learner performance in the past five years, which is evident in the matric results, lessons could be drawn from this district. We used their length of experience as a selection criterion to recruit circuit managers. They both had worked in the position for over five years. In addition, they were leading programmes geared towards improving learner performance in their district. To generate field texts (referred to as data in other research methodologies), we used a method known as a narrative interview. The narrative interview is a pertinent data generation method in narrative inquiry; it allows participants to freely relate their experiences (Adler & Clark, 2014; Clandinin, 2013) since it is unstructured.

The field texts were evaluated using two procedures: narrative analysis and analysis of narratives. The first analysis method involved the organisation of each participant's field text into a comprehensible and chronological explanation, using strategies to capture their experiences (Polkinghorne, 2002). The outcome of this process was re-storied narratives. We refer to these narratives as re-storied because they were first told by the participants as field texts and then organised and retold logically as research texts (Clandinin, 2013). In this paper, we do not present the re-storied narratives owing to the word limit; however, reasonable extractions from these narratives are presented in the findings. The second method involved the scrutiny of participants' re-storied narratives to identify examples or themes to answer the research puzzle (Polkinghorne, 2002). This process yielded four themes, which are discussed in the following sections. To ensure anonymity, we used pseudonyms to refer to the participants; the first participant is named Collaborator, and the second is named Inspirator. All ethical considerations were observed.

Findings

This section presents the responses to the research puzzle - how do circuit managers influence learner performance in a thriving district? Four themes from the findings reflecting the practices through which circuit managers influenced learner performance in a thriving rural district emerged. These themes are directing support to all grades while not losing sight of Grade 12, direct involvement in monitoring learners' work, exposing principals to learning opportunities, and recognising and rewarding good performance and are discussed below:

Directing Support to all Grades while not Losing Sight of Grade 12

Grade 12 receives much attention in the South African education system, given that learner performance at this grade is primarily used to gauge the performance of schools (Memela & Ramrathan, 2022). The narratives illustrated that the participants recognised the need to focus on lower and senior grades. For instance, Mr Collaborator explained that his support and intervention strategies focus on all grades to ensure effective teaching and learning and that learners perform as required. The support and intervention strategies focus on ensuring accountability and curriculum coverage in all grades.

We have embarked on a mission to ensure work is done in both the GET and FET phases. We started a massive programme to ensure accountability in Grades 7, 8 and 9 by analysing learner performance and tracking the Annual Teaching Plan (ATP) coverage. We are concerned about Grades 7, 8 and 9 learners; we are worried about all grades.

Similar sentiments were shared by Mr Inspirator, who also emphasised that lower grades required attention. Below, he explains his initiative:

We have had meetings with all the Grades 4 and 7 Departmental Heads. We started with Grade 7 and Grade 4. You see, the truth is that the GET phase monitoring has been zero, if not closer to zero. It seemed like a cruise to the beach where everyone was doing their own thing.

In most cases, the education districts' support and interventions focus predominantly on Grade 12s, perhaps because matric results are analysed to show multi-level performance: school, circuit, district, and province (Mthembu, 2018). However, neglecting lower grades may damage a school or district and lead to the fallout of those interventions geared towards improving learner performance. The spreading of support across grades reflects the joint effort to improve learner performance, thereby minimising the pressure that comes with an intervention only directed to Grade 12 because learners would have been prepared in previous grades.

While previous studies found circuit managers primarily focusing on evaluating principals for compliance (Bhengu et al., 2014; Honig & Rainey, 2019; Naicker et al., 2013), in this study, they appear more involved in working with principals to improve learner performance across all grades. Their involvement through meetings with departmental heads and principals to support teaching and learning across phases suggests they collaborate with the schools to improve learner performance. Apart from this, the participating circuit managers engage in joint work, one of the qualities of district instructional leadership, suggesting that district officials should work alongside principals to achieve improvement (Honig, 2012; Mthembu, 2018).

Direct Involvement in Monitoring Learners' Work

Usually, circuit managers support schools through principals, considering principals are accounting officers responsible for all school management aspects. While the participating circuit managers work with principals in supporting schools, they seem to get their hands dirty by directly monitoring the work of teachers and learners. The direct involvement of the circuit managers is different; for instance, Mr Collaborator visits schools to check the work of teachers and learners and to address learners, highlighting adherence to curriculum coverage.

I check curriculum coverage, learners' exercise books, lesson preparation, marking, the quality of work given to learners, and whether teachers give feedback. Apart from this, my fellow circuit managers and I have made it a habit in our circuit to see and talk to learners; we speak to them because we believe there is nothing about them without them. Therefore, we regularly make time to address the learners.

Mr Inspirator is also directly involved in the monitoring of learners' work. However, his approach differs from that of Mr. Collaborator. He gathers a team of school principals and departmental heads from four or five schools to check learners' books. He groups and makes them anonymously check learners' books and note the findings, which are later discussed. He explains below:

When we go for monitoring, we sit; for example, we usually have about four or five schools per team. Everyone becomes a member of that sitting, principals and departmental heads. We then look at the work of one school at a time; the first school will put all their exercise books on the table. Everyone evaluates and puts down their findings.

It is evident from the participating circuit managers that they monitor teachers' work. While their direct involvement may be viewed as an exercise to promote accountability in schools, some may argue that circuit managers are overstepping their mark, given that school-based managers and subject advisors also monitor the work of teachers and learners. In this paper, we look at this practice from a positive perspective and perceive the circuit managers' direct involvement in monitoring as an added accountability layer and a way to ensure that school-based leaders understand and can execute the monitoring of teachers' and learners' work. These circuit managers seem to help deepen principals' engagement in monitoring teachers' work by modelling or demonstrating expected practices rather than instructing or directing them (Honig, 2012). Such a practice will likely increase principals' understanding and execution of monitoring teachers' and learners' work, thereby impacting learner performance (Goldring et al., 2020; Honig, 2012).

Exposing Principals to Learning Opportunities

Circuit managers understand that there are few opportunities to develop principals professionally in South Africa, and they create opportunities for principals to learn. They achieve this by making principals learn from one another; among other initiatives, they take them to well-performing schools outside the district, develop subject clinics, develop professional learning communities (PLCs), and invite fellow circuit managers to address principals. The circuit managers seem concerned about ensuring principals are well-equipped for their roles and responsibilities in leading and managing their schools effectively. Mr Collaborator below explains how he twinned principals under his leadership with the principals of excelling schools within and outside the district:

There is also this thing of twinning within and outside the circuit. There is also an instance where we went to seek assistance from the Principal of OCSS at another district in the province in one particular year ... we took everybody, not only high schools, we took all school principals there to listen and learn from the principal of a very successful school in a township. That is part of my role, as I am there to say, "Colleagues, let us move".

The sentiments of Mr Collaborator are shared by Mr Inspirator, who also explains that they took principals to schools known for excellent performance, including MS School. This rural school has produced outstanding results over the years. He explains:

We went to MS, we visited IZM, we visited MSS, and in fact, the other circuits that have been visiting schools outside the district learnt from my circuit. The purpose of these visits was to give our principals a chance to interact and learn from the principals of these high-performing schools.

Apart from twinning and setting up schools to network with excelling schools, the circuit managers developed PLCs for principals to share and learn from one another. Within this arrangement, they invite presenters within or outside the district to guide principals on specific aspects. Mr Collaborator explains below:

We also receive help from other circuit managers because we cannot claim all the credit and pretend to have achieved everything on our own. In our district, the competition is very healthy. You see, I do not find it difficult to call people like Mr Inspirator and say to him, "Mr Inspirator, here are the principals; talk to them; what are your strategies? Share with us". I have done it twice, during which Mr Inspirator was invited to address principals in our circuit.

Mr Inspirator does something similar to Mr Collaborator's initiative; he does not call it subject clinics but PLCs. Mr Inspirator identifies principals who are strong in certain aspects of their work and makes them assist others. He expands below:

We group ourselves if we want to deal with issues of finances. For instance, we identify schools performing very well in terms of finances and create a space for other school principals to learn from these schools. Following this, we monitor the progress of colleagues after learning from a peer(s). We formed a professional learning community (PLC) within which we meet and work on our programmes. We do not focus on finances only, but we check for peoples' strong points in terms of performance and then create a space for them to share their strengths with others.

The continued space for learning and development of principals is a core focus for the participating circuit managers; the use of multiple strategies to this end suggests their commitment towards the professional growth of principals under their leadership. The findings demonstrate that circuit managers are realistic in their expectations of principals in achieving better learner performance. This finding resonates with Mthembu's (2018) study, which found that some district leaders in the Gauteng Province foster peer-to-peer learning between schools and school principals through administrative provisions such as school clusters or networks. The participating circuit managers appear to be executing the recommendations by Naicker and Mestry (2015) of establishing PLCs and networks between district officials, principals, and teaching staff to facilitate a system-wide change towards learner performance.

In addition, the above reveals circuit managers' commitment to creating and sustaining social engagement, which Honig (2012) perceives as district instructional leadership's feature. Social engagement entails conversations with others to enable peer-to-peer sharing and learning, which is presumed to increase the individual and collective knowledge they bring to the settings (Honig, 2012).

Recognising and Rewarding Good Performance

Encouragement to excel is achieved through rewarding excellent performance. The circuit managers maintain that the reward of exceptional performance motivates educators who perform well to continue, and those who do not are inspired to improve their performance. Below, Mr Collaborator explains:

We also reward these teachers for their excellence, so we reward them annually after Grade 12 results are released. The awards are working for us; this becomes evident in the jubilation and element of ownership which we see during these awards each year. For us, the awards serve as motivation to our teachers, and we often hear people saying, "I want to be part of the winning team next time".

Rewarding performance is embedded within the district's culture; thus, Mr Inspirator shares sentiments similar to Mr Collaborator's. He explains:

We award teachers with certificates of excellence and give them prizes in the form of money. Since no money was budgeted for the teachers' prizes, we had to source a sponsor. This sponsor wished to augment their contribution in the following year. They pledged to give us a little bit more. We want people to see this bigger picture and understand that the hardship they are going through in terms of working hard is recognised. While we wish to do more to acknowledge and show appreciation for our teachers' hard work, the means are limited. It is very important for teachers to see that we appreciate them. We give a prize for producing at least five distinctions and award schools that produce 90% or more. The number of teachers who usually get this prize money ranges from 11 to 12. Apart from this, we award the most improved school(s).

Acknowledging excellent performance seems vital for the participating circuit managers to maintain excellence. These leaders believe it is critical to inspire teachers as they are essential for improved learner performance. Thus, their investment in sourcing sponsorship. The solicitation of funds reflects the participants as brokers who develop new ideas to advance learning (Honig, 2012). Apart from this, the participating circuit managers' justification for rewarding excellence is to motivate teachers; this resonates with Honig's notion that brokers develop new ideas to protect the resources available to support learning (Honig, 2012).

Discussion

This study focused on the influence of circuit managers on learner academic performance in a rural district. The paper identified four significant practices through which the participating circuit managers influence learner performance. Firstly, they directly support all grades. Secondly, they are directly involved in monitoring learners' work. Thirdly, they expose principals to learning opportunities. Lastly, they recognise and reward good performance.

By closely examining these practices, we deduced that the participating circuit managers influence learner performance in schools. Their influence is indirect since they do not participate in classroom activities. Instead, they exert influence through principals, deputy principals, departmental heads and teachers. According to the job description, circuit managers should work with principals, provide professional support, and help schools advance (RSA, 2013). The above practices show that they perform up to expectations. Many assert that circuit managers inadequately perform their role and are thus the weakest link to supporting teaching and learning (Bantwini & Moorosi, 2018). However, this study's results revealed the opposite.

Given that this study was undertaken in a rural district that has produced excellent results over the years, circuit managers in other districts may be inspired by this study's findings. The participants reaffirmed their commitment to the schools' success under their supervision. Their practices reflect district instructional leadership features that aim to help principals learn to lead for excellent classroom teaching (Honig & Rainey, 2020). According to Honig (2012), district instructional leadership involves five practices: focus on joint work, model, develop and use tools, broker and differentiation. These five practices were reflected in the participating circuit managers' efforts to improve learner performance. Prioritising principals' growth was notable in these circuit managers' initiatives.

We conclude that the participating circuit managers adopt an approach of working through and with principals to influence learner performance. Regarding '*working through*', circuit managers understand that they are not directly involved in classroom activities. They provide the principals with the capacity and support to ensure they can lead in their respective schools. In terms of '*working with*', the participating circuit managers did not come across as instructors or dictators to principals; instead, they worked with them. They even monitored teachers' work with principals and occasionally with deputy principals and departmental heads. In this study, the circuit managers worked directly with principals and other school leaders to influence learner performance positively. Even though characterised as a weakest link (Bantwini et al., 2017), this study revealed important lessons that other circuit managers may emulate to impact learner performance positively.

Conclusion

This paper reports a small-scale inquiry into the circuit managers' influence on learner performance. Two circuit managers in a thriving rural district constituted a sample through which we qualitatively engaged with this phenomenon. Considering this sample size, the findings do not reflect the views and practices of circuit managers across education districts in South Africa. We make two recommendations in this study. First, the findings showed the significance of collaboration between circuit managers and principals in a thriving district; therefore, we recommend that circuit managers forge collaborative relationships with principals to support them. Second, it is evident from the literature that much focus has been placed on district leadership in general, with very few studies exploring the role of circuit managers. So, we recommend that further research be considered in different provinces with a larger sample of circuit managers. Qualitative and quantitative approaches may be employed to widen an understanding of the circuit management role and the influence thereof on learner performance.

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