

**THE COMMON AND CONTESTED MEANINGS OF  
EDUCATION DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICA**

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

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## **DECLARATION**

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

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Hersheela Narsee

\_\_\_\_\_ day of February, 2006

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## SUMMARY

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

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

The dominant discourse on the role of districts in South Africa places districts as support centres for schools (Mphahlele, 1999; DoE, 2000). While districts post-1994 do not reflect the authoritarian and controlling features of the apartheid era, the study found that policy transmission, policy compliance and 'policy alleviation' (a process where district officials attempt to 'soften' the rough edges of policy effects on schools), tend to dominate district functions. Even the 'support' provided by districts to schools reflects that which is intended by government, rather than that experienced by schools. District agendas are set from the top down rather than the bottom up; hence schools rarely experience district support as a response to their own problems and needs.

In reflecting on the character of districts, the study concludes that there is no *system* of local education in South Africa since there are no common norms and standards governing it. Local education in South Africa does not function as a single organism but comprises disparate structures that vary considerably in organisational design and nomenclature. Despite these differences though, the all-encompassing concept of ‘districts’ to describe local education in South Africa remains ubiquitous in education discourse. An explanation for the homogenisation of the discourse on local education resides with the observation that as deconcentrated units of provincial education departments, districts reflect a common rationale for their existence, namely to serve as field units of government.

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

**Key words**

education, districts, decentralisation, school improvement, apartheid education, local education, delegations, school support, education policy, South Africa.

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## ACRONYMS

ABET	Adult Basic Education and Training
ACE	Advanced Certificate in Education
ACS	Agency Coordination Structure
ATKV	Afrikaanse Taal and Kultuur Vereniging
ANC	African National Congress
BMT	Broad Management Team
CBO	Community-based Organisation
CDS	Curriculum Development and Support
CEM	Council of Education MECs
CEO	Chief Executive Officer
CEPD	Centre for Education Policy Development
CODESA	Congress for a Democratic South Africa
CTAs	Continuous Tasks for Assessment
DAS	Development Appraisal System
DBSA	Development Bank of Southern Africa
DETC	District Education and Training Council
DDP	District Development Programme
DDSP	District Development Support Programme
DET	Department of Education and Train
DETC	District Education and Training Council
DoE	Department of Education
DoH	Department of Health
DNE	Department of National Education [pre-1994]
DPLG	Department of Provincial and Local Government
DPSA	Department of Public Service and Administration
ECD	Early Childhood Development
ECS	Education Co-ordination Services

EDUPOL	Education Policy and System Change Unit
ELRC	Education Labour Relations Council
EMGD	Education Management and Governance Development
EMIS	Education Management and Information Service
ERS	Education Renewal Strategy
ESS	Education Support Services
FEDSAS	Federation of School Governing Bodies of South Africa
FET	Further Education and Training
FFC	Finance and Fiscal Commission
GDE	Gauteng Department of Education
GET	General Education and Training
GETC	Gauteng Education and Training Council
GPG	Gauteng Provincial Government
GSSC	Gauteng Shared Services Centre
HEDCOM	Heads of Departments Committee
HOA	House of Assembly
HOD	House of Delegates
HOR	House of Representatives
HR	Human Resources
HSRC	Human Sciences Research Council
IDS	Institutional Development and Support
IDSO	Institutional Development and Support official
IIEP	International Institute for Educational Planning
Intersen	Combination of the intermediate and senior phases of the schooling system (Grades 4 to 9)
IQMS	Integrated Quality Management System
JET	Joint Education Trust
KZN	KwaZulu-Natal
LCC	Local Content Curriculum [Indonesia]
LETU	Local Education and Training Unit
LPFDS	Learning Programme Facilitation, Development and Support
MBA	Master of Business Administration
MEC	Member of the Executive Council
NAPTOSA	National Professional Teachers' Organisations of South Africa

NASGB	National Association of School Governing Bodies
NECC	National Education Co-ordinating Committee
NEPA	National Education Policy Act
NEPAD	New Partnership for Africa's Development
NEPI	National Education Policy Investigation
NGO	Non-governmental Organisation
OBE	Outcomes-based Education
OECD	Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development
OFSTED	Office of Standards for Education and Development
PFMA	Public Finance Management Act
PHO	Provincial Head Office
PSA	Public Service Act
PSC	Public Service Commission
PTT	Provincial Task Team
PWV	Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging
RCL	Representative Council of Learners
RSA	Republic of South Africa
SADTU	South African Democratic Teachers Union
SAOU	Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie
SASA	South African Schools Act
SETA	Sector Education and Training Authority
SGB	School Governing Body
SMT	Strategic Management Team
TED	Transvaal Education Department
UK	United Kingdom
US	United States
USA	United States of America
USSASA	United School Sports Association of South Africa
VSP	Voluntary Severance Package