THE COMMON AND CONTESTED MEANINGS OF EDUCATION DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICA

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

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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 Vereninging
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

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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

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Chapter 1

BACKGROUND TO THE STUDY

1.1 Purpose of the study

How does an education system organise itself in the absence of explicit government policy? More specifically, how does the spatial and political idea of an education 'district' come into being without the regulatory guidance of official policy? This is the core intellectual puzzle that directs and inspires this study on education districts in South Africa.

Accordingly, the purpose of this study is to explore the common and contested meanings of districts in the South African education system. It aims to illuminate how meanings are assigned to education districts, in practice as well as in theory. The study, further examines the constitutional, legal and policy contexts that inform the niche that districts occupy in the South African education system, as well as stakeholders' understandings of the meaning of districts. In addition, the district office 'in action' is examined by means of a case study of a district in a provincial education department, to explore how districts function in practice in the education system. The thesis of this study is that districts in the South African education system reflect a particular form of decentralisation that confers bounded but contested meanings to districts, which limits but simultaneously unleashes possibilities about what districts can and cannot do. In sum, the research aims to uncover the common and contested meanings of education districts by focusing on the following research questions:

1. How do education stakeholders understand the meaning of 'education districts' in the constitutional, policy and legislative contexts of post-apartheid South Africa?

2. In what ways do provincial governments organise, structure and assign meaning to education districts given the policy vacuum around the specification of district design and organisation in South African education?

3. Why do different meanings of the concept of education district exist? That is, what explains the common as well as the divergent understanding and organisation of education districts in the South African context? How do these different meanings relate to the concept of decentralisation and the peculiar relationship between the provincial and national departments of education?

1.2   Rationale for the study

Although districts are part of the education landscape in South Africa, [1] there is no explicit government policy on education districts. While there are singular references to districts in major policy texts of the national Department of Education (DoE) – such as Whole School Evaluation (DoE, 2001a) and Inclusive Education (DoE, 2001c), there remains a glaring policy vacuum on the purpose of districts and on the role they are expected to play in the education system. The absence of a policy outlining a vision of districts is surprising, given the importance attached in politics and scholarship to districts as a vehicle for promoting wide-scale, systemic transformation in education (Malcolm, 1999; Dalin, 1994; Elmore, 1993b). Other components of the education system, such as schools and provincial departments of education, are established with considerable clarity in national education policy and legislation; yet there is a puzzling silence about the role of local-level education. Moreover, other government departments such as the Department of Health have clearly defined and demarcated the role of districts in social service delivery (RSA, 2004), while the Department of Education has been persistently quiet on district policy. The purpose of the study, therefore, is to explore how districts are understood and organised in the South African education sub-system in the absence of national policy. The study seeks to understand why the structure of education has taken the shape that it has, and how stakeholders understand and play out the role of districts in the education system.

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[1] This study uses the term 'districts' as an all-encompassing concept to refer to geographic units that exist at a level between schools and the head offices of the provincial education departments. Hence the concept includes structures such as regions, wards, circuits and area project offices that presently exist in the provincial education departments.

The study explores how a district actually functions: how it determines and prioritises its activities, how it exercises its authority and power in relation to the schools it services, how it relates to the head office of the provincial department of education, and whether it derives its agenda by 'looking up' to the provincial head office or by 'looking down' to the school.

The current literature on districts in South Africa is limited for several reasons. Firstly, the research that has thus far been undertaken on education districts (Prew, 2003; Fleisch, 2002a; De Clerq, 2002a) has not been able to capture the recent changes that have come about as a result of the effects of restructuring in provincial departments (DoE, 2003).[2] Secondly, much of the research on education districts focuses on district-school relationships (Godden & Maurice, 2000; Malcolm, 1999; Chinsamy, 1999; Mphahlele, 1999). The relationship between districts and provincial head offices, particularly from the perspective of decentralisation, has not been explored adequately in either the normative or the empirical literature.

This study contributes to the existing knowledge base on districts in a number of different ways. Firstly, it reveals how education stakeholders understand the role and place of districts in the context of a political transition. Secondly, it illuminates how districts actually function in the current context of education transformation in South Africa. Thirdly, it proposes an explanation for the different meanings ascribed to districts within the framework of existing theories on decentralisation. At a broader level, the study contributes to international scholarship on the meanings attached to administrative and management decentralisation in education. The unique context of this study is the absence of explicit national and provincial policy on education decentralisation in South Africa, and the implications this has for the way in which decentralised management and administration of education is understood in practice. Grant-Lewis and Motala (2004:119), confirm that 'the term 'decentralisation' is rarely used in South African education policy documents'. Many countries, including Asian countries such as India and Pakistan (Govinda, 1997)[3] and Indonesia (Biennen, 1990), and Western countries

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[2] A recent Department of Education report notes that a significant number of provincial education departments are still in the process of operationalising their new organograms (DoE, 2003).

[3] In his report on decentralisation of educational management in five South Asian countries (Bangladesh, India, Nepal, Pakistan and Sri Lanka), Govinda (1997:19) observes that 'all the countries, in their recent policy statements on education, have without exception reiterated their commitment to promote decentralisation….'

such as the United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand (Caldwell & Spinks, 1992), have clear policy commitments to some form of education decentralisation. Hence the official policy vacuum in which education decentralisation is operationalised in South Africa provides a unique contribution to the international debate on decentralisation.

1.3 The contested meaning of districts

What is the *raison d'être* for districts in the education system? The current South African discourse on education districts oscillates confusingly between districts as support centres for schools, and districts as administrative and management arms of provincial departments of education. The primary purpose of districts, therefore, remains contentious: do districts exist primarily as a base for professional services to schools, or are they established to ensure policy and administrative control?

The international literature points to a number of possibilities for the role of districts – that of active support bases for schools or that of aggressive school monitoring agents. The literature suggests that districts could, alternatively, play a facilitating role in service delivery and school support, or be merely passive mediators between schools and provincial head offices (Elmore, 1993b:120; O'Day & Smith, 1993:284). It is of course quite possible for districts to undertake, to varying degrees, all of the roles proposed above. However, these roles are distinctive, and subject to the vagaries of contesting demands as well as competing priorities and practical realities that districts have to contend with on a daily basis. Can one ascribe a singular role and identity to districts, or does the search for the particular lead one into the trap of what Adesina (2003) refers to as 'Aristotelian binary logic'?

Writing in a broader socio-political context, Adesina (2003:1) argues against retreating into a discourse of binary opposites, and instead calls for an affirmation of the 'interpenetration and mutual embeddedness of opposites' through which identity can be understood as being multilayered, contradictory and contextual. This study attempts to understand districts as complex entities that are imbued with common and contested meanings. However, in attempting to unravel the different meanings attached to districts, the study seeks to abstract how the 'opposites' play themselves out in practice, and explore whether there are dominant forces that do indeed ascribe essentialist properties to

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districts.

The study also offers a curious twist to how the relationship between policy and practice is understood, given the absence of a formal national policy on districts. Levinson and Sutton (2001:4) argue that 'people make policy through practice' and that it is implementation that gives meaning to policy. Hence the question of how the meanings of districts are constructed in practice is a crucial dimension to this study.

1.4 Why districts?

Since the dawn of a democratic South Africa in 1994, there has been considerable interest in the nature and form of local education in South Africa. Coombe and Godden (1995) undertook a significant initiative in this regard in their research into the local and district governance of education, wherein they explored possibilities for the local governance of education. This initiative was followed by a brief period of silence on districts in the education policy agenda, which perhaps led Roberts (1999:2) to describe districts as the 'orphans' of the education system. A rekindling of interest from the Department of Education emerged in 1998, reflected in its District Development Programme (DDP), which aimed to enhance the role of districts in education service delivery (DoE, 2000). Interest in South African education districts has not been restricted to the Department of Education. Since 1999 to date, a significant number of donor agencies have commissioned studies and engaged in several large-scale projects on district development in South Africa (Fleisch, 2002b). The Department of Education views districts as being crucial for large-scale, systemic transformation of the schooling system; in contrast, donor agencies see districts as platforms from which school improvement programmes can be delivered (DoE, 2000; Fleisch, 2002b).

The growing international interest in districts has been driven by a number of different impulses. (Elmore, 1993b:108) argues, for instance, that (in the context of the United States) districts have a comparative advantage over other levels of the education system since they provide 'an important policy and administrative link between national policy goals and school-level practices'. Building on Elmore's argument, Chetty (DoE, 2000:3) observes that there is an imperative to focus on districts because 'districts are closest to schools in terms of management, and it is simply easier to make an impact on the more

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than 27 000 schools in the country by working through districts instead of working directly with schools'. Fleisch (2002b:3), on the other hand, claims that districts are important because 'they are the major, and often the only source of external support received by schools'. Other researchers have highlighted the importance of districts in the context of the sustainability of system-wide education transformation initiatives of government (Fleisch, 2002b; Muller & Roberts, 2000; De Clerq, 2001; Mphahlele, 1999; Malcolm, 1999; Dalin, 1994). Slavin and Fashola (1998:92) also argue that 'if schools are to reform themselves on a large scale, it is essential that they have the proactive support of their districts'.

Hence the focus on districts has been driven by several closely-related, but somewhat different impulses: those driven by the imperative for more efficient administration and management of schools; those driven by school improvement arguments; those emphasising the need to promote sustained, wide-scale and systemic change in schools; and those driven by the need to ensure a strong policy link between schools and the centre. In broad terms, one can conclude that the different emphases attached to the importance of districts in the education system point to two central opposing forces at play – forces that emanate from the centre, and those that emanate from the school. The study explores how these two forces play themselves out in practice, and in the different meanings stakeholders attach to districts as a result of different imperatives acting on districts.

1.5 Research design

1.5.1 Research aim

The intention of this research is to describe and explain the common and contested meanings of education districts in South Africa, through a single case study that illuminates how districts are understood in the practical context of the education system. In addition, the study endeavours to unravel the historical, legal and constitutional meanings assigned to districts in the context of the political transition in South Africa.

1.5.2 Research approach

Given the focus of this study on "meanings", I found the interpretivist paradigm of research to be most appropriate for the task I sought to undertake. Hence the ontology underlying the thesis is based, in the main, on Interpretive Social Science, which is related to hermeneutics, a theory of meaning (Burrel and Morgan, 1992). Interpretive Social Science is based on the belief that social reality is not "out there", waiting to be discovered. Instead, it argues that the social world is largely what people perceive it to be.

Interpretative research thus seeks to understand the meanings people construct about the world and their experiences in it (Merriam, 1998:6). The interpretative framework, therefore, sees human activity and institutions as 'social constructions' – created by people – rather than the product of external forces which mould individuals and institutions in ways that can be predictable (Vulliamy et al., 1990:9). Hence a dominant feature of the interpretative research paradigm is that it foregrounds meanings that people assign to their experiences, rather than privileging formal text. However, a caveat to this approach is that it does not attempt to represent the original 'voice' of those researched or their intentionality, but instead accepts that the researcher constructs her meanings from the research that has been undertaken – that the research is mediated through the investigator's own perceptions (Merriam, 1998:6).

The interpretive paradigm underlining the study is complemented by a qualitative research approach, which I believe best serves to uncover the meanings of stakeholders' experiences. The thesis adopts a dual approach to its qualitative focus: a case study of a district (discussed in detail below), as well as elite interviews. Elite interviews were undertaken with people who had been central to providing policy direction in education, and whose world-views would have inevitably had an impact on policy. They consisted largely of interviews with senior bureaucrats in the national Department of Education.

1.6   Research methodology

1.6.1 The case study

The critical questions posed in the study are explored through a single, qualitative case study that illuminate how provincial departments of education have understood the

meaning of districts in the absence of policy specification. According to Yin (2003:13), 'a case study is an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real life context, especially when the boundaries between the phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. The case study approach provides an in-depth understanding of how stakeholders, based both within and outside of districts, understand the meaning of districts; it also provides insights into how and why districts function the way they do. In view of Merriam's (1998:29) proposition that 'the end product of a case study is a rich "thick" description of the phenomenon under study', the presentation of findings on the case under study includes a literal descriptive component (see Chapter 5).

The empirical component of this research is a South African case study of an education district in the Gauteng Department of Education GDE).

A purposeful sampling strategy was utilised to identify the province and district for the case study. Patton (cited in Merriam, 1998:61) argues that the logic and power of purposeful sampling lies in selecting an information-rich case from which one can learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the study. Hence some prior knowledge of the case is crucial for applying purposeful sampling as a strategy to select a case (Cohen et al., 2000). From my knowledge of provincial education departments,[4] I believed that the study would be most useful if it was undertaken in the Gauteng Department of Education. The reasons for this are as follows:

❑ Relatively speaking, the GDE has had longer experience with its new structures and systems than other provincial education departments, who have only more recently undergone major restructuring processes, and who, unlike the GDE, have had little opportunity to 'settle' into their new organograms. Hence the insights emerging from GDE officials and schools were expected to be more 'mature' when compared to other provinces, where insights into fundamental issues could be expected to be clouded by teething problems experienced by officials and schools during the restructuring processes.

❑ The subject of districts has, for some years, been high on the agenda of the GDE, and

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[4] I recently undertook a countrywide snap-study of districts on behalf of the national Department of Education. The DoE (2003) report on districts points to recent restructuring initiatives in most of the provincial departments of education.

that district roles, powers and functions have been the subject of intense debate and discussion in the GDE.[5] One could predict, therefore, a rich engagement with provincial and district officials on district issues, which would enhance the quality of this study.

❑ The recent initiative by the GDE to shift certain administrative functions from districts to the Gauteng Shared Services Centre provides for an interesting 'twist' to the meaning of districts and their role in the delivery of administrative services to schools. Whether districts are still perceived to be units of administrative support to schools is a question that the new administrative model of the GDE poses for this study. Insights into the new model of administration adopted by the GDE is useful, not only for this case study, but for a broader understanding of decentralisation issues in education.

The selection of the *district* of study was informed by the following criteria:

❑ the willingness of the district to participate in this study;
❑ diversity in the types of schools that the district services;[6]
❑ diversity in the composition of staff of the district office, with respect to race, gender and years of experience;
❑ further information from the GDE and other researchers about the district in terms of the historical engagement that officials in the district had with debates about the place of districts in the system (a district that demonstrated an active interest in, and reflected upon its place in the education system was expected to provide a richer insight into the study than one which had not); and
❑ ease of access to the district in terms of its geographic location that had minimal time and financial implications.

From information provided by other researchers and a GDE official,[7] as well as my own professional experiences (see below), the Tshwane South District appeared to be a

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[5] Two years ago I was involved in a project to develop job descriptions for GDE district officials.

[6] By types of schools, I refer to a number of different categories: public or private; township or informal settlement; former department under which the school fell (that is, HOD, HOR, DET or HOA schools), and schools with either Section 20 or Section 21 status in terms of the South African Schools Act (SASA).

[7] I had telephonic conversations with Francine de Clerq and Samiera Zafar, both of whom have engaged in intensive research for the GDE. The GDE official, Marcia Harker, is a Chief Director in the provincial office, responsible for overseeing districts.

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potentially rich source of information in terms of the diversity of schools it services, as well as the diversity of its staff members. In addition, the district office is known to have demonstrated an active interest in broader issues related to the place of districts in the education system.

The 'case', namely the Tshwane South District of the GDE (also referred to as D4), comprises about 224 public and independent schools. The Tshwane South District includes the townships of Mamelodi, Atteridgeville and Laudium, as well as several former "White" suburbs in the Pretoria area. Hence the district services schools that are diverse with respect to historical racial categories that were characteristic of the apartheid era. In addition, the district office is staffed with officials that reflect diversity with respect to gender, race and years of experience in education.

It is understood of course, that the findings from the case study will not be generalisable. Vulliamy et al. (1990:12) observe that case studies are mainly interested in providing a deeper understanding of the characteristics of the totality of the case. In this instance, it was undertaken in the hope that the ensuing generation of ideas might illuminate the processes of districts elsewhere, but not with the intention that any specific finding should be generalised. Although case studies cannot be generalised statistically to other similar contexts, Schofield (2002:178) contends that the replacement of the notion of generalisablity with that of 'fittingness' makes it possible to analyse the extent to which a particular situation matches other similar situations. She argues further that a logical consequence of this approach is an emphasis on the supply of a substantial amount of information about the entity being studied. Hence, 'thick descriptions' of people, settings and events allows for comparisons with other contexts.

1.6.2 Data collection methods

1.6.2.1 Overview

The methods of data collection in the study correspond closely to the three research questions that have been posed. The linkage between the broad research questions and the data collection methods are demonstrated in the overview in Table 1.1.

Table 1.1   **Linkage between research questions and data collection methods**

Research focus	Data collection method	Data sources
Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts	Individual and focus-group interviews	Interviewed principals, teachers, district-level officials, provincial-level officials, officials from teacher unions, and present and former officials of the DoE.
The practical assignment of meaning to districts	Individual and focus group interviews	Interviewed district and provincially based officials of the GDE, schoolteachers and principals.
	Documentation review	Analysed relevant DoE reports and policy texts, GDE organograms, GDE reports and policy documents related to districts.
	Non-participant observation	Observed the district office infrastructure and the office 'in action'. Attended key district meetings as a non-participant observer. Observed interactions between district officials and school staff during visits by district officials to schools.
The reasons for common and contested meanings of districts	Literature and documentation review; interviews	Reviewed the South African Constitution, relevant DoE policy texts and reports, as well as national and international literature. Correlated this material with interview data.

1.6.2.2 Individual and focus group interviews

In line with the interpretative paradigm of this study, in-depth interviews were conducted, based on questions that were open-ended and semi-structured. Each interview lasted for a maximum of two hours. The interview questions focused on the following issues:

❑ stakeholder understandings of the legal, policy and constitutional context of South African districts;

❑ the establishment of districts (the motives for establishing districts, the impulse for decentralisation,[8] the philosophical underpinnings for decentralisation – that is, whether districts were established as part of a development agenda, or as part of a

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[8] Biennen *et al.* (1990) suggest that it is useful to begin an investigation on decentralisation by posing questions about the starting points of decentralisation. This will deepen one's understanding of the motives and consequences of decentralisation.

management agenda or both,[9] territorial considerations in determining the boundary of districts[10]);

❑ the role of districts in the education system (particularly in relation to policy implementation, school support, school supervision and administrative services to schools);

❑ the relationship between districts and schools;

❑ the relationship between districts and the provincial head office (for example, district perceptions of pressures from provincial head office, how districts derive their agendas, and the distribution of functions between districts and provincial head offices[11]);

❑ the source of solutions to problems experienced by schools;

❑ the resources and capacity of districts; and

❑ the activities and programmes of districts.

The interview questions were phrased in a non-threatening manner, so that participants felt comfortable about answering them. After introducing myself and providing the background to the study, I began my questions by asking for biographical information regarding the interviewees' involvement in the district and in education generally, and posing questions regarding the nature of their work. I then proceeded to ask interviewees about their experiences of districts. For example, to a teacher, 'How have district officials influenced the way in which you go about your duties?' A principal was asked, 'On what kinds of issues do you most often interact with district officials?' I used probes to encourage deeper responses, with questions such as, 'How often? With which officials? Do you think there is a need for greater or less interaction with district officials? On what kinds of matters? In what way does your interaction with district officials support you as a school principal?'

Individual face-to-face interviews were undertaken with the following stakeholders:

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[9] Biennen *et al.* (1990) note that official decentralisation policy in Nepal draws on both development and management theories as a basis for reform.

[10] The question of how small and how local a decentralised unit should be is addressed by Govinda (1997:9), who suggests that factors such as the politico-administrative arrangement of the country, the geographical expanse of the country, socio-cultural factors and the size of the educational enterprise (for example, the number of institutions to be managed) should be taken into account when determining the size and geographical locality of the decentralised unit.

[11] Govinda (1997:11) asserts that 'any decentralisation measure has to tackle the question of implicit hierarchy encompassing various management functions and decide the level at which different functions are to be performed'.

- nine teachers selected from the different types of schools that were identified for this study;
- nine school principals selected from the different types of schools that were identified for this study;
- the District Director;
- the deputy director in the district responsible for administrative services;
- the district-based chief education specialist responsible for institutional development and support (IDS);
- the district-based chief education specialist responsible for curriculum development and support (CDS);
- the provincially-based official of the GDE responsible for Tshwane South District;
- the provincially-based manager in the GDE responsible for the area of curriculum development and support;
- the Head of the Office of Standards for Education and Development (OFSTED) Unit based at the GDE head office;
- the district official responsible for the administration of examinations in schools; and
- national stakeholders that included key officials from the three nationally recognised teachers unions,[12] associations of school governing bodies[13], current and former officials of the DoE who had been involved in matters pertaining to the local level of the education system, and legal experts.

Focus group interviews were held with the following:

- one focus group interview with two teachers;
- focus group interviews with Institutional Development and Support officials (IDS) officials based at the district office; and
- focus group interviews with Curriculum Development and Support (CDS) officials based at the district office.

In addition, I conducted telephonic interviews with several district officials as well as the

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[12] These are: The South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU); the National Association of Professional Teacher Organisations in South Africa (NAPTOSA) and the Suid-Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie (SAOU).
[13] These are: National Association of School Governing Bodies (NASGB) and Federation of School Governing Body Associations (FEDSAS).

Chief Executive Officer of the Education Labour Relations Council, to obtain clarity on outstanding matters.

Interviews with approximately 25 different sources were planned for this study. My initial list of interviewees was, however, not exhaustive. Drawing on Patton's ideas (cited in Merriam, 1998), I utilised the 'snowball' method of sampling to identify key individuals or groups suggested by the interviewees, who could contribute to this study. In effect, this study ended after completion of close to 50 interviews (see Annexure 1).

The selection of teachers and principals for interviews was based on the identification of school types. The key filter applied in the selection of schools within the Tshwane South District was that of inheritance, namely the former (pre-1994) education department under which the school had been administered. This selection criterion is not uncommon in many empirical studies undertaken in the country, as schools, in addition to reflecting racial designations associated with the pre-1994 era, often reflect particular characteristics in line with their apartheid inheritance.[14] For example, former White schools (House of Assembly) have a far superior infrastructure, are better resourced and employ more highly qualified teachers than former Black schools (Department of Education and Training [DET]).[15] In addition, the quality of education is perceived by many to be higher in former White schools than in former Black schools. This perception is strengthened by the recent investigation of the Human Sciences Research Council (HSRC) into educator workloads in South Africa, which found that teachers in former White schools spend more time on actual teaching than those in former Black schools (ELRC, 2005b). The selection of schools in accordance with their pre-1994 categories, therefore, provides access to a relatively inclusive and diverse range of teachers and principals required for this study.

Ten such schools were identified:

❑ four schools from the former Department of Education and Training (DET);
❑ two schools from the former House of Assembly (HOA);

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[14] Major studies that I have been involved in, such as the Education 2000 Plus Project of the CEPD (1999-2003), and the investigation into Educator Workloads by the HSRC (2005), have utilised such historical categories in their sampling of schools.
[15] A draft report on Post-Provisioning Norms (ELRC, 2005) concludes that former White schools employ more highly qualified teachers (excluding SGB-funded posts) than former Black schools (ELRC, 2005).

❑ two schools from the former House of Delegates (HOD), and

❑ two schools from the former House of Representatives (HOR).

These schools were further divided into primary and secondary school categories to ensure that teachers from different grades and phases would participate in the study. The latter was undertaken to ensure that the study reflected a wide range of teacher experiences of the district office.

It is perhaps worth drawing attention to the fact that the schools selected in this study do not by any means reflect a representative sample of the district. Given the qualitative nature of this study, the sampling process merely attempted to identify principals and teachers that would predictably demonstrate a diverse range of characteristics and experiences.

The initial plan for the study envisaged 24 individual teacher interviews, from ten different schools. There were to be four focus group interviews with six teachers in each group. In addition, the study had planned for two focus group interviews, each with five principals from the ten selected schools. However, the data collection plan did not work as predicted, despite various attempts. Much of the problem lay in expecting teachers and principals to meet at a central venue. I have learned, much to my disappointment, and after several failed meetings, that this is an almost impossible undertaking! I succeeded in holding only one focus group interview with teachers, this with only two teachers present. I subsequently amended my data collection plan, and decided to interview teachers and principals individually, at the schools in which they were based. I visited each of the ten identified schools in the district, and managed to interview nine principals and nine teachers. Of the latter, two teachers were interviewed at the time when the 'successful' focus group interview meeting was held.

Appendix 1 outlines the list of interviews and observation activities that were conducted for this study. As indicated, a total of 40 individual face-to-face interviews, seven focus group interviews, two telephonic interviews and three formal non-participant observation activities were undertaken for the purposes of gathering data

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1.6.2.3 Non-participant observation

On-site observations were made of the infrastructure, physical space and physical resources of the district office. The observations made of the district office under study reflect to some extent the 'meanings' that the GDE assigns to districts.

In addition, I sought permission to observe various types of meetings after some level of trust had been established between myself and district officials. A key aspect of this study was to observe how district officials interacted with schools and among themselves. Whether district officials were supportive or bureaucratic in their approach to schools[16] and whether district officials displayed an integrated and team approach to their work were some aspects that this study explored. I undertook school visits as a non-participant observer with two categories of district officials: Institutional Development and Support officials (IDSOs) and CDS officials. The selection of school visits were based on a number of criteria that included: the purpose of the visit, whether the district official was comfortable with my presence, and whether the nature of the visit was expected to provide insight into the relationship between schools and districts. In addition, I had hoped to be involved in school visits that involved a diverse range of issues such as curriculum, governance, labour, procurement, resources and so on. By the end of the study, I had accompanied a group of CDS officials on a curriculum-related school visit, and had visited three schools with an IDSO.

1.6.2.4 Document analysis

An understanding of how provincial governments assign meanings to districts, and an explanation for the common and contested meanings of districts required an analysis of various documents that would confirm or refute what stakeholders articulated in their interviews, as well as provide a broader context in which the empirical findings of the study could be analysed. The study demanded that different categories of documents be examined, for example:

❑ *legal* documents such as the Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA), and relevant provincial and national Acts and Regulations that make reference to districts;

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[16] Malcolm's (1999) models of districts suggest different ways in which districts can relate to schools.

- ❑ *policy* documents (national and provincial policy texts that were relevant to the subject of districts);
- ❑ provincial *organograms* (that outline the official structures and staff provisioning norms of the GDE); and
- ❑ relevant planning documents (strategic plans of the GDE and key GDE reports).

The documents were analysed according to pre-coded categories that were generated from the literature review. However, new themes emerging from the documents were included on an ongoing basis.

1.6.2.5 Approach to the collection of data

While interviews with stakeholders that were based outside of the district were conducted only once, those with key district-based officials took place in two waves. The first wave of interviews focused on questions related to the 'meanings' of districts, while the second wave focused on how the district actually functioned and interrogated issues that required further clarity.

I visited the district office frequently during the course of the study. During these visits, interviews were conducted, on-site observation was undertaken and meetings observed. The district office visits were arranged so that they corresponded to the beginning of the school year (when a number of issues such as admissions and textbooks are often of public interest), in the second term (when a fair level of 'normal' activity could be expected in the district office), and in the third term when there is a general focus on examination activities.

1.6.2.6 Personal journal

A personal journal was employed as a tool to encourage reflexivity in my research. My experiences, reflections and thoughts about districts and the research process were recorded in the journal. Additional questions, probes and improved ways of phrasing questions were also part of my personal records. In addition, the journal was used to record casual observations of the district office and casual conversations held with participants.

1.6.3 Data analysis

Analysis of the data was consistent with a qualitative case study methodology, in that it was inductive and iterative. Three key steps were followed in analysing the data: the development of thematic constructs, the indexing of thematic data, and the piecing together of the whole picture (Miles & Huberman, 2002:315). The first stage of data analysis was undertaken by constructing categories, themes and concepts that cut across the different information sources. Pre-coded categories and *a priori* issues derived from the theoretical framework, as well as from codes emerging from ongoing fieldwork, were developed for this stage of data analysis. The second stage of data analysis involved the indexing of interview transcripts in accordance with a descriptive textual system based directly on index headings. Finally, the perceptions, accounts and experiences of stakeholders were reviewed, compared and contrasted. Explanations for the data were sought by examining the literature on the subject as well as documentation sources. The perspectives of different stakeholders were compared and contrasted according to the different interests they represented.

One of the analytical challenges confronting the study was how best to understand the 'meaning of districts' in a context involving a range of stakeholders whose perspectives reflected a range of 'multiple realities'. I found Prawda's (1992) conception of *discrepancy analysis* a useful tool to interrogate the voices of stakeholders. According to Prawda, discrepancies between what an organisation believes and what it actually does are very common and have been the subject of intensive studies of late. Prawda (1992:6) uses three sets of observations to demonstrate discrepancies within organisations. Firstly, the objectives, goals and targets espoused by the policy makers are not always those actually pursued. The second point concerns the differences between what the organisation does, believes it does, is believed by others to do, and is supposed to do. Thirdly, the approach examines the discrepancy between the formal structure versus the actual structure of the organisation. Therefore, I utilised the tool of *discrepancy analysis* to analyse the functioning of districts by comparing different sources of information with a view to constructing an understanding of reality that reflects its complexity.

1.6.4 Validation strategy

The trustworthiness of reported observations and interpretations of interviews strove for

maximum validity through the following mechanisms:

- *Triangulation* – Multiple sources of data (eg. teachers, principals, district officials and national stakeholders), and multiple methods (document analysis, interviews and on-site observation) were used to search for convergence to form themes and categories for the study.
- *Member checks* – The data (which was tape-recorded and transcribed) was taken back to the interviewees so that they could confirm the accuracy of the information.
- *Repeated observation* – Repeated observation of the district office and gathering data over a period of time increased the validity of the findings. Cresswell and Miller (2000) suggest that being in the field over time solidifies evidence because researchers can confirm their data over time, and compare interview data with observational data.
- *Thick description* – The case study attempted to provide a detailed and vivid description of the district setting, the participants and the themes of the study, as well as direct quotations from stakeholders about their perceptions. The vicarious experience offered by the case study enables readers to make decisions about the applicability of the findings to other similar contexts.

1.7   Limitations of the study

Like all studies of this nature, this research undertaking is not free of limitations. Recognition of these limitations is particularly crucial for the way in which the findings of the study are interpreted and reported. The following limitations need to be considered when reading this thesis:

- This research is based on a single case study of a district in Gauteng, a province that is well-resourced and better placed to provide effective services to schools (given its comparatively small geographic size), relative to other provinces in the country. Hence while the conclusions reached by this study do have broader relevance, the specific findings on Tshwane South District cannot be generalised to the country as a whole. Notwithstanding this, the insights offered by Tshwane South District can be appropriated by other districts for what Merriam (1998) refers to as *fittingness,* into their own contexts.

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❑ The perceptions of teachers and principals in this study cannot be generalised to the broader population of schools in the district, as a statistical sample of teachers and principals was not be used. However, the deep insight provided by the interviews permits the study to make *analytical generalisations* (Yin, 2003) about how school-based educators construct meanings of districts.

❑ My presence in meetings would have undoubtedly influenced how district officials behaved and interacted with schools as well as each other (the Hawthorne effect), thus negatively affecting the validity of some of the data.

❑ The shift of administrative functions from districts in the GDE to the Gauteng Shared Services Centre (GSSC) is a recent phenomenon. Hence stakeholder perceptions of the new system and the concomitant role of districts may be clouded by adjustment problems.

1.8 Ethical considerations

The Faculty of Education's Ethics Statement was used as a basis for discussion of a research protocol with the GDE. Hence a commitment was made for the GDE to receive a report of the research findings, and for GDE respondents to provide feedback on the study.

1.9 Conceptual framework

The thesis draws on Malcolm's three models of districts (1999:10)[17], as its conceptual framework for understanding and analysing the meanings of districts.

The three forms of districts, namely the bureaucratic, market-led and community models provide a valuable metaphoric frame within which the relationship between districts and schools can be understood.

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[17] Malcolm drew on Sergiovanni in describing his three district models

In the bureaucratic model, Malcolm (1999:10) sees districts as having a largely controlling role – 'passing down policies from Head Office, distributing resources and conducting inspections and audits'. In this model, the district has a hierarchical relationship to schools. In the market forces approach, the district has a limited role, mainly that of co-ordination and as a provider of information services, and it is not in a hierarchical relationship with schools. The community model of districts suggests something in between the bureaucratic and market models. In this instance, the district is not in a hierarchical relationship with schools, but is in an organic relation with them. In the community model, the district is responsible for both support and accountability, as well as co-ordination and information flow (Malcolm 1999).

The three district models embody possible ways in which stakeholders perceive the meanings of districts, as well as represent different ways in which districts could function in the education system. The study draws on Malcolm's (1999) conceptualisations of districts with a view to exploring whether there is a dominant model that characterises education districts, or whether districts reflect a mixture of the features described in Malcom's (1999) three models, or whether districts can be conceptualised outside of the three models proposed by Malcolm. The characterisation of districts is important for the study as it serves to gauge the meaning/s ascribed to education districts in South Africa. However, the study does not attempt to 'fit' districts into Malcolm's three models. Instead, the study is sensitive to the multiple meanings attached to districts, while simultaneously examining whether there are dominant currents in the way in which districts are understood in theory and in practice in the education system.

One of the limitations of Malcolm's models is that they are derived from a single dimension – that is, the dimension of district-school relationships. Because districts occupy a place between schools and provincial head-office structures, the meanings of districts cannot be fully understood if the *specific* relationship between districts and the provincial head-office is ignored. As pointed out in the decentralisation literature (see Chapter 3), districts exist because higher levels of authority find it prudent to shift certain elements of administrative and management responsibility to a lower level in the system - hence the vital need to obtain an insight into district-provincial relationships.

Consequently, the district models discussed above, though valuable, are limited in their application to the study. The study therefore draws on additional frameworks such as those on decentralisation and school improvement (as examined in the literature review in the next chapter), to unravel a holistic perspective on districts.

1.10 Overview of thesis

This thesis comprises eight chapters, three of which (Chapters 5, 6 and 7) relate directly to the case study under investigation, namely Tshwane South District. Chapter 2 provides a critical review of the literature on the subject, and serves as a foundation for the empirical component of the study.

Chapters 3 and 4 focus on the historical, legal and constitutional issues surrounding local education in South Africa. Much of the information for these chapters is derived from my reading of the Constitution (RSA, 1993, 1996) and various government legislation and regulations. In addition, stakeholder interpretations of relevant legal and constitutional frameworks are interrogated and analysed. Chapter 3 traces the origins of districts in South Africa, and explains how the term 'districts' came to be employed to describe the local level of the education system. Chapter 4 describes the various configurations of local education design that make up the South African education landscape, and explains why there is no policy on education districts in South Africa.

Chapter 5 focuses on selected aspects of Tshwane South District - what Godden and Maurice (DoE, 2000) refer to as the 'key pillars of district performance'. These include areas such as the powers of districts, their legal status and capacity, and clarity about their roles and functions. In addition, this chapter provides a 'thick' description of the Tshwane South District Office, with the hope of providing the reader with a vicarious experience of the district office.

Chapter 6 details the programmes and activities of Tshwane District South with a view to obtaining rich insights into what district officials actually do and how they go about doing their work. This chapter also details the nature of district-school interactive spaces, and provides insights into the system of clusters adopted by the Gauteng Department of Education.

Chapter 7 addresses the research question on how stakeholders understand the meaning of education districts in the context of the multiple roles of districts in the South African education system. It draws attention to the metaphors used by stakeholders in describing how they understand the role of districts, and describes in depth how stakeholders perceive the relationship between districts and schools on the one hand, and districts and provincial head offices on the other.

Given the rather complex place of districts in the education system, this study is undertaken from the perspective of a variety of different paradigms. These offer different portholes and lenses through which, I believe, districts can be best understood.

The following chapter critically reviews the existing literature on a range of theories and frameworks, including decentralisation discourses, the implications of public organisation theory on districts, the role of the state, and the impact of school improvement, school effectiveness and school change theories on the role of districts in the education system.

Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW: VIEWING DISTRICTS THROUGH MULTIPLE PORTHOLES

2.1 Introduction

A subject as expansive as that of education districts is best viewed from a multidimensional perspective. As decentralised units of government, districts mirror the debates associated with the phenomenon of decentralisation; as organisational units, they harbour many of the tensions inherent in public organisations; as service centres for schools, districts are central to the dynamics of school change and improvement; and in serving as crucial links between schools and government, districts are often considered as representing the voice of the state. Hence this literature review interrogates the knowledge base on districts through a series of different portholes with a view to obtaining a holistic, multifaceted picture of education districts. Hence it draws on several paradigms and theoretical frameworks that provide windows into the different facets of the subject. In this vein, the paradigms of school improvement, school change and school effectiveness, the discourses of decentralisation, and the frameworks offered by organisational theory are some of the portholes through which the literature has been explored.

A number of authors have expressed concern about the dearth of research on education districts. Malcolm (1999:5) cautions about expecting too much of the existing international literature about districts given its paucity, and Chinsamy (1999:3) observes that while there is an abundance of international literature on schools, a limited body of research exists about sub-level systems of education. In her search for literature on the features of effective districts, Roberts (2001:9) points out that while much has been written about school effectiveness and improvement, relatively little research has been

undertaken on district effectiveness. Fleisch (2002b:9), however, notes that while the body of international literature on district improvement is not extensive, it is increasing due to the growing recognition of the important role of districts in bringing about education improvement.

Observations about the paucity of literature on education sub-systems are not restricted to South African writers on the subject. In their international investigation into school supervision and support services, Carron and De Grauwe (1997:vii) and Wilcox (2000) lament that until recently, researchers have been neglectful and indifferent to matters of professional supervision and support services for teachers, although these have existed in almost every country for a long time. Writing from the perspective of the American context, Lusi (1997:2) notes that there has been little empirical study of what government Departments of Education do, and of the contexts in which they operate.

Despite the observation made by Lusi (1997), much of the existing international literature on local education emerges from the contexts of developed countries, where districts have a different meaning to that in South Africa. In the United States of America (USA) and the United Kingdom (UK), for example, districts represent a separate level of governance in the education system, as compared to the South African context (Chinsamy, 1999), where education districts are seen as administrative arms of provincial departments of education (DoE, 2003a). The observation that much of the literature on education districts derives largely from the United States and the United Kingdom is not surprising given that districts in these countries carry much more responsibility for education functions compared to other levels in the system in other countries (DBSA, 1993:108). According to a ten-country comparative study conducted by the Development Bank of Southern Africa (DBSA, 1993), the district level of the USA and UK education systems bear responsibility for 33% and 25% of total education functions respectively, compared to countries such as Mexico where districts carry only 13% of education functions, Malaysia where districts carry 10% of total education functions, and Nigeria and Senegal where there is no district level of governance or administration in the education system (DBSA, 1993: 108). Thus, there is a close association between the weight of functions carried by districts, and the level of research on districts.

Any literature review, by definition, involves the selection, abstraction, interpretation and

synthesis of available information. The result is, therefore, invariably informed by the researcher's own world views, experiences and theoretical frameworks, as well as by an understanding of how the review will be used in the context of a specific study, at a particular point in time. Thus I feel obliged to position myself within this research study. I have, until recently, been a researcher at the Centre for Education Policy Development (CEPD), a non-governmental organisation, in Johannesburg, and was seconded to the Department of Education to work on a project related to district development. In the context of my work at the Department of Education, I am keen to explore further the constitutional, legal and policy debates that informed my work on the district project.

2.2 Viewing districts through the window of decentralisation

2.2.1 Perspectives on decentralisation

Education districts world-wide reflect some form of spatial decentralisation of education services from the centre. Hence their very existence derives from either deliberate or 'accidental' attempts at decentralisation. Therefore a key dimension of this literature review is the niche that districts occupy in the education system. Central to the review of the decentralisation literature is the search for an understanding of the place that districts occupy in the education system, in the context of existing models of decentralisation. The arguments for and against decentralisation are examined with a view to interrogating whether and how the redistribution of authority at the meso level of the education system can enhance the quality of education services to schools.

The literature on education decentralisation is voluminous. However, despite the extensive research undertaken on the topic, debates on the concept, nature, rationale and effects of decentralisation continue to rage. Although different perspectives and emphases mark much of the decentralisation debate, the education decentralisation literature of the past few decades generally examines similar themes:

❑ the *concept* of decentralisation (of which there is still surprisingly little consensus);
❑ the *rationale* for decentralisation (Tyack [1993] observes cynically, that arguments for greater centralisation in one period of reform turn out to be the same arguments

for greater decentralisation in the next period);

❑ the *effects* of decentralisation policies (numerous individual and multiple country case studies spanning all continents are reflected in the vast corpus of the decentralisation literature); and

❑ the ideal conditions for the effective *implementation* of decentralisation (this area has been focused upon by authors such as Cheema and Rondinelli [1983] and Prawda [1992]).

Much of the education decentralisation literature of the 1970s and 1980s is rooted in the administrative development paradigm of multinational agencies such as the World Bank, and is underpinned by a largely fiscal and administrative efficiency discourse (Rhoten, 2001). In contrast, the discourse of the decentralisation literature of the 1990s is more about the redistribution of political and social power. Rhoten (2001:7) has characterised these two periods of decentralisation as the first and second waves of education decentralisation, as they reflect distinct origins, rationales and effects. Samoff (1990:515), on the other hand, likens these two trends in the decentralisation literature not so much in chronological terms but in terms of what he coins 'liberal interventionist and radical populism' perspectives.[18] Both Rhoten's (2001) and Samoff's (1990) characterisation of the trends in decentralisation approaches provide useful frameworks for understanding the literature on decentralisation as they assist in identifying shifts in the discourse on decentralisation. A further distinguishing feature of the decentralisation literature of the 1970s and 1980s compared to that of the 1990s is provided by Hannaway and Carnoy (1983:xii) who conclude that the earlier period of decentralisation was characterised by what they term 'system level' decentralisation – that is, decentralising decision making from national to local jurisdictions – while that of the 1990s focuses on organisation-level decentralisation (decentralising decision making from central authorities to schools) and market decentralisation (decentralised decision making to parents).

The liberal interventionist perspective of the decentralisation literature includes attempts to examine ways in which decentralisation policies can be made to work more effectively (Cheema & Rondinelli, 1983; Prawda, 1992), and searches for ways in which decentralisation experiences can be transferred across different contexts. However, there

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[18] The liberal interventionist orientation explicated by Samoff (1990) refers to external advice provided to international agencies and to Third World governments to promote broad development goals, while 'radical populism' centralises citizen participation and empowerment as key goals of decentralisation.

is an increasing volume of literature that is suspicious about motives for decentralisation, is more cynical about the stated benefits and effects of decentralisation, and therefore adopts post-modern approaches to the application of decentralisation policies (Reimers & McGinn, 1997; Bollen, 1996; Ball, 1994; Weiler, 1993; Elmore, 1993b). Post-modern thinking rejects the concept of universal blueprints of decentralisation that work 'best', and claim that decentralisation policies should be contextually specific, tentative and modified in the course of implementation. Hence a number of authors (Elmore, 1993b; Samoff, 1995; Sayed, 1995; Reimers & McGinn, 1997; Karlsson, 1994) suggest that it is too simplistic to engage with the debate on education decentralisation from an either/or paradigm, and that the debate should instead be informed by questions about which powers and functions should be distributed to which levels of the system, for what purpose, and the potential beneficiaries of such policy, in a given context.

In the South African context, the more recent literature on decentralisation has focused on *school-level* decentralisation (Pampallis, 2002; Patel, 2002; Karlsson, McPherson & Pampallis, 2001; Squelch, 1999), as opposed to *system-level* decentralisation. The literature on system-level decentralisation (which refers to national, provincial and local levels of education) in South Africa emerged in the period immediately prior to and following the dramatic political change in the country from an apartheid to a post-apartheid system of government (NEPI, 1992; Sayed, 1995; Coombe & Godden, 1996); it focused on examining policy implications of decentralisation for the post-apartheid education system.

Very little research in the country has been undertaken about the way in which decentralisation actually manifests itself at the district level of the education system, particularly after the recent restructuring processes that have been initiated by provincial departments of education. Therefore, this study on education districts will contribute to an understanding of the nature and form of decentralisation manifest in South African local education.

2.2.2 International trends in decentralisation

There is some indication in the literature that decentralisation is currently enjoying a renaissance, and that centralisation is now often considered to be the antithesis of progress (Huque, 1986:79; Mangelsdorf, 1988:68; Rhoten, 2001). In mapping the global

origins of recent trends towards education decentralisation, Rhoten (2001) demonstrates how international agencies such as the World Bank and USAID have actively promoted, legitimated and even stipulated decentralisation policies in many developing countries. However, the trend towards decentralisation is not as clear as is pointed out by the authors referred to above. A number of other scholars claim that both centralising and decentralising tendencies are at work in many countries. There appear to be seemingly contradictory pressures for centralisation (increasing government control over policy and direction) on the one hand, and decentralisation (more responsibility for implementation and resource management at school level) on the other. Standardised testing and performance indicators are in vogue, while at the same time, school-based decision making in different forms has become popular (Taylor *et al.*, 2002:469; Hopkins & Lagerweij, 1996:62; Cohen & Spillane, 1993:36). The report of the National Education Policy Initiative (NEPI, 1992:33) observes, however, that developed countries are moving towards greater centralisation whereas developing countries seem to be favouring greater decentralisation.

In the context of this study, the contending pressures for decentralisation on the one hand and centralisation on the other imply that districts, too, experience opposing forces of push and pull. An understanding of the broader concepts of decentralisation contributes to an understanding of how education districts in South Africa mould into existing concepts of decentralisation. Chapter 8 concludes that districts struggle do resolve the tensions of centralisation and decentralisation by attempting to respond to both the needs of schools and to those of the head offices of provincial education departments.

2.2.3 The concept of decentralisation

The only agreement in the literature about the concept of decentralisation is that that there is little agreement on what decentralisation really means (Fullan & Watson, 2000; Mwafrica, 1999; Sayed, 1995; Samoff, 1990; Lauglo & McLean, 1985; Conyers, 1984; Cheema & Rondinelli, 1983). According to Conyers (1984:187), everyone knows roughly what decentralisation means but defining it precisely presents problems because it can be used in a number of different ways and in significantly different contexts. Samoff (1990:515) despairs that the use of the term 'decentralisation has produced a distorted and discordant discourse that has rendered effective dialogue on the subject nearly impossible'.

Despite the 'cacophony' (Samoff, 1990) on the concept of decentralisation, various attempts have been made by a number of authors over the past few decades to harmonise conceptions of decentralisation.

Lauglo and McLean (1985) restrict the notion of decentralisation to government, and propose that decentralisation usually means a transfer of *control* from national to local bodies within a public, governmental system (Lauglo & McLean, 1985:3). Cheema and Rondinelli (1983), on the other hand, provide a wider scope for the concept of decentralisation, both in terms of the type of agencies in which decentralisation occurs as well as the nature of decision making to which such decentralised agencies have access. They define decentralisation as 'the transfer of planning, decision-making, or administrative *authority* from the central government to its local units, semi-autonomous and parastatal organisations, local governments or non-government organisations' (Cheema & Rondenelli, 1983:18). Although Lauglo and McLean (1985) and Cheema and Rondenelli (1983) place different emphases on the meaning of decentralisation, the basic conception common to both definitions is that decentralisation is the transfer of some form of decision making from the centre to local levels or to particular groups.

If Lauglo and McLean's (1985) definition of decentralisation is taken to its logical conclusion, it implies that if there is no transfer of control from one level of government organisation to another, then there is no real decentralisation. Indeed, a number of authors have contested whether decentralisation has really taken place in various systems despite rhetoric to the contrary. Chau (1985:97) and Huque (1986), for example, argue that if there is no change in the distribution of power between the centre and the region, pseudo-decentralisation rather than true decentralisation has occurred. Winkler (1993:102) believes that administrative decentralisation is not decentralisation at all because it does not result in transfer of control from one level to another. Samoff (1990:528) confirms that what some authors view as partial decentralisation of authority, or as administrative decentralisation, others view as not being real decentralisation.

However, by sifting through the morass of differing conceptions of decentralisation, Samoff (1990) uncovers a useful lens through which one could conceptualise decentralisation. Samoff proposes a distinction between what he calls 'administrative

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decentralisation' and 'political decentralisation'.[19] He uses the lens of *purpose* to distinguish between these two forms of decentralisation, and draws on their respective discourses to illuminate their distinctive features. He argues that the language of administrative decentralisation is one of 'service delivery, efficiency, and behavioural incentives and rewards', while that of political decentralisation is one of 'effective participation, empowerment and collective action'. According to Samoff, therefore, the primary purpose of administrative decentralisation is not political in the context of participation and empowerment, but instead emphasises organisational arrangements and strategies for improving policy implementation, while political decentralisation is about promoting citizen participation through the transfer of decision-making authority to previously under-represented or marginal groups (Samoff, 1990:516). However, an immediate concern with Samoff's administrative-political dichotomy is its potential effect of 'depoliticising' administrative decentralisation. Does Samoff imply that administrative decentralisation is apolitical? A further reading of Samoff suggests that this is not the case – in fact, far from it. He clarifies his argument by suggesting that 'to focus on administrative decentralisation is to assert a particular political orientation, because not to ask who rules, or who benefits, is surely as political as posing those questions' (Samoff, 1990:524). At the same time, Samoff (1990:528) admits that 'administrative reforms that do not involve or enable the transformation of power relations are possible and possibly useful'.

Herein lies the confounding basis of Samoff's administrative-political dichotomy – while accepting the 'political' in the 'administrative', Samoff's separation between administrative and political purposes of decentralisation can only imply that he uses the administrative-political dichotomy of decentralisation as a tool for managing the debate on decentralisation in terms of the *purpose* of decentralisation.

I find Samoff's (1990) typology of decentralisation useful for this study as it helps to question whether the form of decentralisation currently present in the South African education sub-system has been driven by administrative and management requirements, or whether sub-system units have been established to enhance participation and

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[19] Fiske (1996:10) also distinguishes between political and administrative decentralisation. He argues that 'political decentralisation involves the assignment of decision-making powers to citizens or their representatives', while administrative decentralisation is a 'management strategy, where political power remains at the top of the organisation, but responsibility and authority for planning, management, finance and other activities is assigned to lower levels of government'.

empowerment. Despite my adoption of Samoff's (1990) typology of decentralisation, I take heed of Govinda's (1997) statement that 'irrespective of the proclaimed rationale for decentralisation, all decentralisation measures involve far-reaching decisions on power-sharing and inevitably carry political overtones'. However, in his analysis of Sri Lankan education decentralisation policy, Govinda (1997) also recognises the possibility that political decentralisation can be delinked from administrative decentralisation. He observes that

> Sri Lanka adopted a pragmatic view for decentralising educational management by, at least partially, delinking the educational management sector from the ongoing efforts to decentralise the public administration system through political reform (Govinda, 1997:19).

The conceptual delinking of administrative (Samoff, 1990) and management decentralisation (Govinda, 1997) from political decentralisation offers a constructive frame of reference for this study as it delineates the paradigms within which education districts in South Africa can be investigated.

The typology of decentralisation outlined by Samoff is similar to that proposed by Rhoten (2001:2) and Lauglo and McLean (1985). Rhoten conceptualises decentralisation as an organisational (administrative and fiscal) and a political (participation and empowerment) policy, while Lauglo and McLean talk to the administrative, political and ideological categories of decentralisation. Thus both Rhoten (2001) and Lauglo and McLean (1985) draw on administrative and political categories used by Samoff to conceptualise decentralisation. Winkler (1993), on the other hand, contends that administrative decentralisation is not really decentralisation at all because it is not accompanied with the assignment of extensive decision-making powers, which are usually associated with decentralisation. Winkler adds, however, that the popular meaning of decentralisation is very much country specific. She points out that in some Latin American countries, for example, decentralisation means the delegation of powers to the regional offices of the ministry, while in other countries it refers to the constitutional transfer of such power from regional to local governments (Winkler, 1993:102).

In view of the above, a key question for this study is whether districts in the South African education system do indeed reflect a system of decentralisation at all, and, if they do, to examine the forms in which such decentralisation actually occurs. Chapters 6 and 7 reveal that education districts in South Africa exhibit a form of administrative

decentralisation, the features of which are discussed in further detail below.

2.2.4 Organisational forms of decentralisation

The decentralisation literature is replete with categories used to describe the various ways in which decentralisation is manifested organisationally. The most common labels used by authors include the notions of devolution, delegation and deconcentration. However, the most comprehensive description of organisational forms of decentralisation emerges from Rondinelli *et al.* (1989:72), who conclude that there are five major organisational forms of decentralisation – privatisation, deregulation, devolution, delegation and deconcentration.

According to Rondinelli *et al.* (1989:72), *privatisation* and *deregulation* represent organisational forms of decentralisation that permit governments to divest themselves of responsibilities for functions either by transferring them to voluntary organisations or by allowing them to be performed by private businesses.

Devolution, on the other hand, reflects decentralisation *within* government structures, and according to most authors (Lauglo& McLean, 1985; Chau, 1985; Mangelsdorf, 1988; Naidoo, 2002) represents the most extreme form of decentralisation within government. Devolution generally implies a shift in programmatic responsibility from the central to local government, and requires that local government be given autonomy and independence, and be clearly perceived as a separate level over which central authorities exercise little or no direct control (Rondinelli *et al*. 1989:74). Through devolution, central government creates units of government that are outside of its control, and have the status and power to secure resources to perform their functions. In devolution, permanent authority is transferred over financial, administrative or pedagogical matters, and cannot be revoked at the whim of central officials (Fiske, 1996:10). Mwafrica (1999:2) adds that devolution refers to a form of political decentralisation where a local government has an established local assembly with members that are usually elected.

Delegation implies a lower level of decentralisation than devolution. According to Rondinelli *et al*. (1989), it refers to the transfer of authority from central government to either lower levels of government and/or external agencies, but which, according to Fiske (1996:10), can be withdrawn. Litvack (1998) notes that while organisations (both within

or outside of government) that have delegated authority have a great deal of discretion in decision making; although they are not wholly controlled by the centre, they are ultimately accountable to it.

Deconcentration is generally accepted as the least extensive form of decentralisation within government (Naidoo, 2002; Lauglo & McLean, 1985; Lyons, 1985), and in its weakest form merely involves the shifting of workloads from the centre to staff located in offices outside of the centre (Rondinelli *et al.*, 1989:76). Lauglo (1995:58) emphasises the spatial nature of deconcentration by suggesting that 'deconcentration means greater geographical decentralisation of state authority, transferring to local officials more authority to take initiatives, to budget, and to recruit and deploy staff'. However, Lyons (1985:86) notes that deconcentration means that the centre retains the main elements of strategic control of the system while the scope of planning, decision making and control at the local level of the system is enlarged. Litvack (1998), on the other hand, contends that deconcentration does not involve any transfer of *authority* to lower levels of government, but instead involves the dispersion of *responsibilities* for certain services from the centre to branch offices. Mwafrica (1999:3) agrees with Litvack, and observes that deconcentration refers to administrative decentralisation where officials appointed by the centre are posted to the field to act as central government representatives. These officials vary in the extent to which they freely exercise discretion in the performance of their duties.

Deconcentration as an organisational form of decentralisation is an important aspect of this study as it provides a platform for understanding how education districts in South Africa relate to their provincial head offices. Chapter 8 concludes that the rationale behind the establishment of education districts in South Africa lies with the imperative for provincial head offices to disperse their responsibilities to lower levels of geographic field units.

Cheema and Rondenelli (1983:18) point to two forms of decentralised local administration that can be found in most developing countries: integrated and un-integrated administration. Integrated local administration is a form of deconcentration in which field staff work under the supervision of the head of that jurisdiction, who is appointed by and responsible to the central government. Un-integrated local

administration is an arrangement in which field staff operate independently of each other. Each officer operates in accordance with guidelines prepared by supervisors at the centre, and local co-ordination takes place informally. The distinction between these two forms of deconcentration is useful for this study, as it points to potentially different arrangements that may exist between provincial departments of education and districts. The study investigates the degree to which districts adopt an *integrated* approach to their tasks, and whether accountability lines of district officials extend upwards to higher levels of district officials or to provincial-level officials, or indeed to both. Chapters 6 and 7 conclude that while education districts in South Africa exhibit a form of integrated deconcentration, accountability lines often become blurred as a result of the desire for programme control by provincial head office staff over district staff.

Lauglo (1995) offers an alternative organisational form of decentralisation –*management by objectives* – that provides a useful way of understanding the relationship between districts and provincial head offices. Management by objectives is seen as a form of decentralisation of authority because it proposes to give those at 'lower levels' in an organisation more flexibility to deploy resources, decide on the means to achieve objectives and resolve conflicts. Lauglo (1995) notes that the technique of management by objectives, which was originally adopted by business and industrial companies but is currently in vogue in the public sector, gives explicit attention to binding employees to the organisation's goals. Management by objectives, therefore, stresses strong specification of tasks by goals, rather than rules and regulations as is commonly found in bureaucratic organisations.

Lauglo (1995) also distinguishes between the management-by-objectives approach and the human-relations approach commonly used in organisations. The human-relations approach gives special emphasis to the personal needs of employees and informal networks while the management-by-objectives approach builds strong collective bonding to the organisations' overall goals. One of the important features of the management-by-objectives approach in organisations is the use of performance indicators. These are part of management information systems that are used to monitor the extent to which objectives are reached, and serve as measures of external accountability. However, Lauglo (1995) cautions that the effective application of the management-by-objectives approach depends on how concretely objectives are identified, how realistic the

timeframes are for meeting the objectives, and the need for shared planning to determine how the goals can be realised. Hence strong capacity to plan and to mobilise involvement in planning is key to the success of the management-by-objectives approach.

Lauglo's typology of different approaches adopted by organisations to improve efficiency and effectiveness (bureaucratic, management by objectives and human relations) provides a useful tool for examining how district officials fit into the provincial department of education as a whole.

The different organisational forms of decentralisation that have been mapped out by Rondinelli *et al.* (1989) and Lauglo (1995) have different implications for the organisational structure, form and the degree of power or authority to be transferred. But even if these forms of decentralisation differ in their characteristics, they are often not mutually exclusive, and in reality governments generally use a mixture of different forms of decentralised planning, decision- making and administration.

2.2.5 Rationales for decentralisation

Rationales for decentralisation have been the focus of attention of numerous decentralisation experts over the past few decades. For example, Lauglo and McLean (1985) claim that decentralisation commonly occurs for administrative, political and ideological reasons; Weiler (1993) concludes that advocates of decentralisation usually advance political, efficiency and culture-of-learning arguments for decentralisation. The literature also points to some of the disadvantages of centralisation, which include a tendency to focus on macro issues, a lack of direct political accountability, a perception of entitlement by beneficiaries, the possible deskilling of teachers, the stifling of creativity and the emergence of *de facto* local control due to management and communication problems (NEPI, 1992:33).

Cheema and Rondinelli (1983) list 14 arguments that have been advanced for decentralising development planning and administration in Third World countries. These correspond closely to the categories adopted by Prawda (1992:3) and Winkler (1993:104), both of whom attribute the popularity of decentralisation to four main reasons: finance, efficiency, effectiveness and redistribution of political power.

The *finance* argument calls for shifting part of the burden of education to sub-national units of government, to community and voluntary organisations, to the private sector and to parents.

The *efficiency* argument addresses the issue of how educational resources are used. It argues that allowing local units of government, which are geographically and culturally closer to local needs, to decide where and how to allocate resources will alleviate the problems of wastage, suitable budgetary allocation and mismanagement (Prawda, 1992: 8). The need to overcome bottlenecks that stem from over-centralisation has been argued as a key reason for decentralisation policies in Nepal (Biennen *et al.,* 1990). However, studies undertaken in a number of countries that have embarked on decentralisation initiatives suggest that the relationship between the effects of decentralisation and the efficiency intentions of decentralisation are often incongruent. For example, in her research into the supply systems of rural health programmes in Ecuador, Mangelsdorf (1988:85) concludes that 'the hypothesised link between decentralisation and an increased output of public goods is far from clear'; that while decentralisation led to increased delivery of some public services, it did not do so in all cases.

The *effectiveness* rationale is driven by two key perspectives: that of improved administration and accountability since decentralisation makes the system more responsive to the local community (Winkler, 1993:104), and that of improved 'cultures of learning' since decentralisation can provide greater sensitivity to local cultures, traditions and languages, as well as empower teachers to have greater control over curriculum decisions (Weiler, 1993:65). Prawda (1992:8) adds that decentralisation is effective because it also promotes local innovations.

According to Winkler (1993:105) and Prawda (1992:9), the r*edistribution of political power* rationale to decentralise is commonly undertaken to empower groups in society that support the policies of central governments, or to weaken groups that pose obstructions to these policies. Weiler (1993:69) adds that decentralisation can be seen as an instrument of conflict management, because it can easily isolate and contain sources of conflict, and also fragment reform movements.

In examining the rationale for decentralisation from an education management

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perspective, Govinda (1997:12) notes the following six factors identified by Caldwell (cited in Govinda, 1997:12) that have driven decentralised education management in developed countries, some of which also appear in developing nations:

❑ the complexity of managing large educational systems from a single centre and the acceptance of decentralisation as a practical means of improving efficiency in the system;

❑ findings from studies of school effectiveness and school improvement have been used as justifications for decentralisation;

❑ increasing recognition of the need to recognise the professional autonomy of teachers;

❑ a new view of equity which places emphasis on ensuring that students have access to the particular rather than an aggregated mix of resources in order to meet their needs and interests (this is in contrast to the widely held view of equity which emphasises the special needs of disadvantaged groups of society in a collective fashion and relies on central intervention as the means of achieving equity);

❑ the popular demand by parents for freedom to choose schools; and

❑ new forms of management and organisation that place emphasis on management by objectives or performance-based approaches to service delivery that are concerned with the achievement of goals or outcomes rather than the means by which these can be achieved.

Although several of the reasons for decentralisation suggested above (for example, school choice and professional autonomy) refer more directly to decentralisation at the school level rather than to lower levels of administration within the government system, Caldwell's conclusions about the rationale for education decentralisation in developed countries appear to resonate well with the South African context. Hence several of the categories provided by Caldwell are interrogated in this study when exploring stakeholder perceptions of the rationale for the existence of districts.

Despite the many arguments that have been advanced to promote decentralisation policies, many educationists and development authors remain unconvinced about their benefits. Hurst (1985:80), for example, argues that there is little reason to believe that the benefits and advantages so widely associated with decentralised administration are likely

to accrue. He notes that changing a system from centralisation to decentralisation may or may not bring about these advantages, that it may leave matters no better than before, or make them significantly worse because weaknesses are as prevalent in decentralised local administrations as in centralised ones. Hurst (1985) argues further that empirical evidence does not support the proposition that decentralised organisations are more innovative than centralised ones, and contends that decentralisation does not necessarily entail a system which is more participative, effective or efficient.

Research into school-level decentralisation, undertaken by Reiners and McGinn (1997) and by Elmore (1993a), concludes that transferring functions to decentralised levels other than the school does not necessarily improve (or decrease) the quality of services provided, in part because it does not automatically lead to changes in the organisation of the school, and therefore does not lead to changes in teaching process. Elmore (1993a) asserts that research on centralisation and decentralisation in American education demonstrates a complete disconnection between structural reform and the learning achieved by students. He argues that while decentralising reforms seem, at least on the surface, to provide very plausible answers to the ills of public education (inefficient and unresponsive bureaucracy), repeated cycles of centralising and decentralising reforms in education have had little discernible effect on the efficiency, accountability or effectiveness of public schools (Elmore, 1993a:34).

Elmore's (1993a) argument is strengthened by Bowe and Ball (1992:64), who, in drawing on their experience of the policy of local school management in the United Kingdom, assert that decentralisation is not concerned with matters of pedagogy, theories of learning or questions about assessment, but instead focuses on the relationship between the state and institutional management which seeks to 'privilege market mechanisms over and above a State co-ordinated and managed system'. They argue that, far from releasing people from the burdens of bureaucracy, decentralisation increases administrative load and often distracts educators from the task of educating students.

Decentralisation policies have also been criticised for entrenching inequalities in education systems, particularly in developing countries. (NEPI, 1992:33).

Questions about whether decentralisation leads to greater empowerment and participation

by 'the people' have been raised by a number of authors, since it has been observed that often decentralisation does not transfer authority or devolve power to the people, but instead shifts the locus of power away from a powerful elite at the central level to an equally powerful elite at the local level (NEPI, 1992:33; Broadfoot, 1985:105). Bowe and Ball (1992:72) argue that while self-determination appears to provide schools with new freedoms, it also opens them up to blame for their 'failures', and leaves them with the dilemmas and contradictions inherent in government policy.

Questions surrounding the merits of decentralising the curriculum have also been raised in the literature. Smith and O'Day (1991:4) contend that by letting content expectations devolve to the school, policy makers avoid difficult decisions about what should constitute a core body of content to be learned by all students, resulting in the teaching of low-level skills and knowledge with which teachers are familiar. Weiler (1993:65) presents the dilemma of curriculum decentralisation by noting that while it recognises the importance of culturally specific learning environments, the demands of modern labour markets and communication systems seem to require more generalised and uniform competencies, skills and certifications at national and international levels.

The arguments for and against decentralisation have both merits and demerits, and there appears to be no absolute value in either centralised or localised systems. According to Samoff (1990:521), both are important and both must coexist. However, the extent of decentralisation that is desirable can be determined only in concrete situations. Elmore (1993a: 35) observes that 'if the historical debate tells us anything, it is that the central policy question should not be whether to centralise or decentralise, but rather what should be loosely controlled from any given level of government, and what should be tightly controlled'. Thus for Elmore the key issue is the purpose, extent and nature of influence any given level of government should exert over another level.

In the South African context, the literature has paid scant attention to the *purpose and rationale* for the establishment of districts in the context of the broader decentralisation debate. While the South African literature offers *education rationales* for the importance of districts (such as systemic reform and school improvement), little has been discussed about decentralisation rationales for the establishment of districts. Chapter 8 analyses how the rationale for establishing districts from a decentralisation paradigm explains the

character of local education in South Africa.

2.2.6 Implementing decentralisation

Much research has been undertaken to isolate those factors that enhance or impede the success of decentralisation efforts. Prawda (1992:16) introduces the concept of 'decentralisation implementation', which is concerned with the degree to which conditions exist for decentralisation to take place effectively. He (1992) concludes that successful decentralisation requires:

❑ full political commitment from leaders of all levels of the political system, teacher unions, and so on;

❑ a model addressing the issue of which functions and responsibilities could be more efficiently and effectively delivered at the central level and at other levels, and explicitly defining the degree of accountability of the different participants;

❑ an implementation strategy and timetable;

❑ clear operational manuals and procedures;

❑ continuous training for the improvement of skills levels;

❑ relevant performance indicators that are continuously monitored; and

❑ adequate financial, human and physical resources to sustain the process.

Prawda (1992:56) notes that worldwide evidence points to the paramount importance of the above conditions, as no system can last for long if decentralised units of government are incapable of absorbing new responsibilities and implementing them effectively.

Bjork (2003), however, introduces a new perspective on why decentralisation policies often do not work. In his study of teacher responses to the devolution of curriculum decision making to schools, Bjork (2003) found that Indonesian teachers have experienced great difficulty in responding to the new Local Content Curriculum (LCC) Programme introduced by the Indonesian Ministry of National Education. Bjork (2003:211) attributes this problem to the clash between the philosophical underpinnings of decentralisation and the culture of acceptance to which teachers have historically been conditioned, and to the underestimation by policy makers of the degree of change required to 'convert a cadre of obedient civil servants into a collection of autonomous, independent-minded educators'. Bjork adds that teachers in Indonesia resisted

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opportunities to increase their autonomy because the values and behaviours of teachers were informed by a civil service system that rewarded loyalty and obedience rather than creativity and innovation. Hence he warns that implementation strategies such as training workshops, increased school-centre interactions and incentive schemes are, on their own, inadequate to bring about changes desired by decentralisation policies – that ideological, cultural and behavioural changes are necessary for decentralisation initiatives to be effective.

The categories for the effective implementation of decentralisation policies provided by Prawda (1992) and Bjork (2003) are drawn upon in this study to establish whether the conditions in which education districts operate in South Africa are geared towards facilitating decentralisation in practice.

2.2.7 Implications of the decentralisation literature for this study

This brief overview of the decentralisation literature has demonstrated how complex and greatly contested the issues surrounding decentralisation are. Notwithstanding its complexity, the decentralisation discourse provides the study with a window through which it has been able to view the niche that districts occupy in the education system.

Firstly, the literature has revealed that education districts in South Africa fit somewhere between the continuum of very low levels of decentralisation and highly devolved forms of decentralisation. Secondly, it has demonstrated that the implementation of decentralisation initiatives needs to be accompanied by significant inputs such as the training of officials in decentralised structures, adequate material resources, clarity on the distribution of roles, powers and functions, and clear operational manuals and procedures. In particular, decisions about which particular functions can be devolved to the lower levels of the system need careful consideration to avoid fragmentation, ineffectiveness and, I would add in the case of South Africa, greater inequity.

Above all else, however, the question on the imperative, the *impulse*, for decentralisation needs dissection. Is the imperative for decentralisation driven by a desire to promote democracy? Is it to enhance responsiveness to different school contexts? Is the intention of decentralisation to devolve responsibility and accountability without really devolving

powers in key decision-making areas? Is the impulse of decentralisation driven largely by economic considerations? Or is decentralisation driven by an ideological impulse which promotes market forces and consumer choice? As Biennen *et al.* (1990) ask, which problems are addressed by decentralisation? Chapters 3 and 4 of this study explore why districts were established in the South African education system, and how they came into being.

Inherent in decentralisation systems are questions about the distribution of powers and functions between different levels in a system. Hence the kinds of functions and the extent to which these are decentralised by the centre to lower levels in a system have been the focus of attention of several major studies (Winkler, 1993; DBSA, 1993). The next section of this chapter examines how countries have opted to operationalise their education decentralisation strategies through choices they have made in the decentralisation of functions.

2.3 Comparing district-level functions with those at other levels of the system

This section of the literature review provides an international perspective on how educational functions are distributed between different levels of the education system. By examining the functions of districts, relative to other levels in the education system in South Africa, the study provides a useful comparative perspective on the role of districts.

In a comparative study of education systems in ten countries, the DBSA (1993) found that policy formulation, planning and implementation are largely centralised functions (between 80% and 90%), but that district-level policy implementation is 50%, as compared to regional and local levels of policy implementation that are 30% and 40% respectively. Other functions such as school organisation, budgets, the determination of qualifications and standards, the determination of subjects and curriculum content, textbook development, language policy, accreditation, examinations, evaluation of educational programmes and research were found by the study to be highly centralised functions, with some elements of responsibility decentralised to regional, district and local levels of the education system. The study found that management of schools is more of a district activity, and that functions such as in-service teacher training and evaluation

of educational programmes are borne by districts to a lesser degree (DBSA, 1993:iii). Although the international picture provided by the DBSA of the distribution of responsibility for various educational functions in education systems hides the specific realities of individual countries, it does highlight a number of key issues. Firstly, at an international level, districts are not the exclusive levels of decentralisation in education systems – other levels of decentralisation such as regions and local levels co-exist with districts. Secondly, districts are involved more with policy implementation and school management issues than with other functions of the education system. Thirdly, the distribution of functions between various levels of the education system is a highly complex matter since responsibility for the same function can be distributed to all levels of the system, but to different degrees and in different ways.

Winkler's (1993:102) study is of a different nature, as it focuses on fiscal decentralisation. It provides a typology of centralised-decentralised models to analyse education systems in four countries, namely, Australia, the USA, Brazil and Chile. Winkler (1993:106) characterises, what he refers to as 'the principle government activities found in public education', as being centralised, mixed or decentralised. In this regard he selects the following components of education for his investigation: a) curriculum and teaching methods, b) examination and supervision, c) teacher recruitment and compensation, d) financing of recurrent expenditure, e) school construction, and d) financial and management audits. His study affirms that countries vary considerably in how they distribute functions across different levels. For example, the financing of school capital expenditures is the responsibility of central government in Chile and Australia, while local governments have principle responsibility for financing capital expenditure in schools in the USA. Similarly, teacher recruitment and remuneration is the responsibility of local governments in the USA and Chile, subject to national standards and regulations, while in Australia, state governments are responsible for teacher remuneration and there is local involvement in teacher recruitment (Winkler, 1993:119). Winkler's study confirms that it is difficult to characterise an education system as being either centralised or decentralised, since the degree of devolution differs across the different components of education.

In South Africa, little research has been undertaken on the distribution of roles, powers and functions between provincial head offices and districts. This study does so, by

examining the actual activities of district officials as well as stakeholder understandings of the functional relationship between districts and provincial head offices (see Chapters 6 and 7).

The following sections interrogate how the literature characterises and identifies the role of districts. It does this by drawing on organisational theory, perspectives on the role of the state, and frameworks offered by school change, school effectiveness and school improvement discourses.

2.4 The role of districts

2.4.1 Viewing districts through the window of organisational theory

Simkins' (2000) characterisation of the nature of public organisations offers an illuminating insight into the tensions that beset public organisations such as districts. He points out that organisations in the public sector operate simultaneously in a number of 'domains', each of which has a rather different set of legitimising norms. These domains are the 'policy domain' of representative government, the 'management domain' of hierarchical authority, and the 'service domain' of professional support for clients. Simkins (2000:320) argues that 'the natural condition of such organisations is a state of tension as each domain struggles to maintain its own integrity and reinforce its own standards within the organisation'.

The three domains of policy, management and service that Simkins attributes to public organisations fits in surprisingly well with the roles of districts that have been identified in the literature. Fleisch (2002b), the African National Congress (ANC, 1994) and Elmore (1993b) include all three of Simkins' domains in their proposed roles for districts, but add that districts have a central role to play in supporting schools. Fleisch (2002b:10), for example, outlines four key roles for districts:

❑ providing administrative services to schools;
❑ driving policy implementation in schools;
❑ providing support services to schools; and

❑   holding schools accountable.

However, Fleisch (2002b) does not interrogate these roles in terms of the inherent tensions that exist within them. The roles of policy implementation, professional and administrative support to schools, and accountability do not necessarily fall within the same bandwidth. They have different objectives and more often than not lead to different outcomes. How districts, in practice, navigate the tensions inherent in these roles, and how these roles are perceived by stakeholders, is a matter that this study interrogates in Chapters 5, 6 and 7.

Meanwhile, though, this chapter continues to explore districts through various portholes. The next section examines how ideas about the role of the state can inform thinking on the role of districts. It does so on the understanding that districts are part of, or extensions of, organs of state,[20] and considers it constructive to scrutinise the role of districts through perspectives on the role of the state.

2.4.2 Viewing districts through the role of the state

The dominant international discourse on state theory revolves around the 'hollowing out' or 'rolling back' of the state (Oldfied, 2001:34). Countries in Central and Eastern Europe, for example, are moving towards a lesser degree of state planning and control, hence their education authorities are changing from being controlling structures to co-ordinating bodies (Carron & De Grauwe, 1997). The changing role of the state in these countries has repercussions for officers in the different levels of the system, in particular for the inspectorate, 'whose main function was precisely to exert control and monitor the respect of centrally imposed decisions' (Carron & De Grauwe, 1997:7). In the case of South Africa, the ideas embodied in the discourse of the 'hollowed out' state set the stage for a radical downsizing of the post-apartheid state, resulting in financial cutbacks and the devolution of social services such as education.

Oldfield (2001:33) argues that the agenda of the post-apartheid state has shifted from one of 'prioritising reconstruction and redistribution through state intervention, to one of *facilitating* the delivery of social services beyond the ambit of state responsibility'. If

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[20] Section 239 (a) of the Constitution (RSA, 1996) includes in its definition of 'organs of state' any department of state or administration in the national, provincial or local sphere of government.

Oldfield's argument on the role of the state is extended to that of districts, then it would appear that districts need to play a facilitation role rather than an interventionist role in relation to schools. The idea of districts as facilitating units suggests a limited role for districts, mainly that of co-ordination, and as providers of information. In terms of Malcolm's (1999) typography of district models, this represents a market model of districts (see section on conceptual framework in Chapter 1).

On the other hand, if South Africa is characterised as being an *evaluative* state, as has been asserted by Sayed and Soudien (2003:6), then by extension, districts would be expected to play a more aggressive monitoring role *vis-à-vis* schools. In this instance, an inspectoral role for districts, as is the case in many countries in Europe, Asia and Africa (Carron & De Grauwe, 1997), will not be incongruent with the notion of an evaluative state. From a 'bottom-up' perspective, an interrogation of the facilitating and/or monitoring roles of districts in terms of their relationship to schools contributes to a broader understanding of the role of the state in South African society.

2.4.3 Viewing districts through the school window

The place that districts occupy in the education system cannot be abstracted from an understanding of the legal, ideological and organisational position occupied by schools. The level of autonomy enjoyed by schools, the extent of central control of schools and the nature of school accountability to higher levels of the system are key determinants to understanding how districts relate to schools. Malcolm (1999) argues that the relationship between the district and the school depends on how one conceives the organisational model of schools and its relative autonomy to the system as a whole.

Over the past few decades there has been a trend in a number of countries to increase decision-making authority at the school level of the education system. Caldwell and Spinks, (1992:14) claim that the considerable evidence of self-management in education is now 'on a scale that warrants its classification as a mega trend'. Malcolm (1999:8) notes that the concept of 'self-managing' schools is dominant in countries such as the United Kingdom, Australia, New Zealand and the United States. He observes that 'in a self-managing school, the government provides basic funds for school operations, and sets guidelines for financial and educational management' (Malcolm, 1998:8); self-managing schools also set their own priorities and are encouraged to raise additional

funds through their communities and/or partnerships with external groups.

According to Caldwell and Spinks (1992:14), two arguments have been offered for promoting the idea of self-managing schools. One is concerned with responsiveness to local conditions, the other with priorities for resource allocation, particularly in times of economic restraint. Caldwell and Spinks, however, do not speak to other possible drivers of self-management, such as the need for increased participation, which has been an argument used in much of the decentralisation literature, nor do they interrogate the ways in which school self-management is circumscribed by control measures that create an 'illusion of self-management' but which in reality is about indirect control by government (Malcolm, 1999:9).

In South Africa, the post-apartheid restructuring efforts since 1994 saw a radical shift in the organisation, management, governance and financing of schools. The change in the policy and legal environment in which schools now operate arrived with the promulgation of the South African Schools Act (SASA) in 1996 (RSA, 1996c). Karlsson *et al.* (2001:174) observe that 'it is clear that the legal and policy environment in which schools operate has fundamentally changed'. SASA allows for schools to have far greater control over their financial matters than in the past, and schools have been given the power to determine school-level policy in a number of areas including admission, language and religion (Roberts, 2001:28).

Pampallis (2003:10) claims that, despite certain restrictions, SASA represents a major decentralisation of power to the school level because it provides school governing bodies (SGBs) with important powers that most schools in this country never had before. However, Sayed and Soudien (2003:4) claim that the 'relationship between the educational state and its sites is inscribed in ambiguity', because of the way in which authority is devolved from central government to the provinces and to the individual school. They argue that in the post-apartheid state control is indirect and 'after the fact', because 'political agendas are frequently contested around interpretations of law, which act as constraining, as opposed to controlling mechanisms' (Sayed & Soudien, 2003:4). This claim is made on the evidence of the increasing number of important legal challenges to the powers of the Minister of Education, and its effect of shifting the battle between the state and schools to the legal domain. Hence Sayed and Soudien (2003:6)

conclude that the institutional site of schooling sits 'at the nexus between juridical regulation and self-management'.

Besides the analysis provided by Sayed and Soudien (2003), the literature provides little interrogation of where schools currently 'sit' in the education system. Nor is there clear policy from government about a vision of schools that accords them self-managing status. The literature appears to suggest that the new model of schools in the South African education system is not one of self-managing schools, as is the case in countries such as the United States, Britain, New Zealand and Australia. Nor are schools under the total and direct control of the state. Instead, South Africa has a unique school model – a model that straddles self-managing schools and state-controlled schools, a model that has features of both centralisation and decentralisation, and one which, while providing much freedom to schools, appears to maintain a strong evaluative and regulatory role for the state. This study examines whether districts, as field agents of the state, do in fact have a strong evaluative and regulatory role vis-à-vis schools, and in doing so contributes towards an understanding of where schools 'sit' in the education system.

2.4.4 Viewing districts through the window of systemic reform

A significant number of researchers (Fleisch, 2002b; Muller & Roberts, 2000; Chetty, 2000; Chinsamy, 2000; Mphahlele, 1999; Godden & Coombe, 1996; Dalin, 1994; Fuhrman, 1993; Elmore, 1993b) argue that districts are crucial for sustainable, system-wide education reform. The interest in system-wide reform is rooted in two factors, namely, the historical failure of other forms of reform initiatives internationally, and the particular context of South African education which is informed by a post-apartheid transformation agenda. The history of education reform internationally is replete with efforts that have lurched from teacher-in-service training, to management development, and more recently to school improvement and whole school development approaches. Mphahlele (1999) and Muller and Roberts (2000:17) note that in the last 30 years, school-focused change models that have been implemented in a number of countries did not bring about the envisaged systemic change in education as they were not sustainable and did not promote multiplier effects. Hence 'more recently districts are increasingly being targeted as nodes of systemic reform and delivery against a context of failing school improvement strategies' (Mphahlele, 1999:7). Dalin *et al.* (1994:xii) reach a similar conclusion from their study undertaken in Bangladesh, Ethiopia and Columbia, namely,

that one of the essential ingredients of successful education change is the 'need for a coherent linkage system between central, district and school levels via information, assistance, pressure and rewards'.

However, Barber (cited in Malcolm, 1991:5) is cautious about over-emphasising the role of districts in bringing about change in schools. He suggests that education change depends on what happens inside schools, and that systems and support agencies 'can only provide frameworks that increase the chances of school success and reduce the chances of failure'. Malcolm (1999:19) contends however that international research is clear in its finding that both outside-in, and inside-out strategies are essential for change. The outside-in approach relies on external support for change, and is based on the assumption that schools and teachers have neither the time nor the expertise to lead change from inside. The inside-out approach reflects a school-driven approach to change and is based on the assumption that school staff have the motivation, knowledge, time and capacity to drive change.

Elmore (1993b), like Barber also expresses concern about the limited role of districts in influencing classroom practice. He observes that 'about 80% of district interaction with schools focuses on matters such as budgets, personnel, pupil behaviour, facilities and parents complaints' (Elmore, 1993b:115). In noting that there is little evidence that district offices are staffed and organised in ways that promote attention to teaching and learning, Elmore advocates that government policy should focus attention and resources on improving the capacity of districts to support schools in teaching and learning.

This study examines whether districts are indeed playing a role in bringing about school change and improvement, how they are going about doing so, and how school stakeholders experience the efforts of districts in institutionalising change and school support. Elmore's (1993b) account of the nature of the interaction between districts and schools, provides a particularly useful focus to the way in which this study explores how district officials balance administrative and management activities with teaching and learning support activities.

2.4.5 Viewing districts through the contest between support and accountability

Much of the literature points to the need for balance between the support and accountability roles of districts to bring about school improvement (JET, 2002; Jansen, 2002b; Fullan & Watson, 2000; Dalin *et al.,* 1994; O'Day & Smith, 1993). Fullan and Watson (2000:459) assert that balancing support and accountability intervention 'is obviously a tough call', but note that the external environment has to become sophisticated enough to play these two seemingly conflicting roles.

In South Africa, the recognition that both support and accountability are necessary to improve school performance was highlighted at a national conference convened by the Department of Education and JET Education Services in 2002 (JET, 2002). At the conference, Jansen (2002b:51) provided what he called 'a heuristic two-by-two representation' of the relationship between support and accountability. According to Jansen, deep change takes place in the context of high support and high accountability, while stagnation occurs when there is both low support and low accountability. In a similar vein, wastage occurs when there is high support and low accountability, and only surface learning takes place when there is high accountability and low support. Jansen concludes that the current context of schooling is characterised by surface learning in schools because accountability is high, and that although great strides had been made to improve the support provided to schools, such support remained low and ineffective (Jansen, 2002b:52). Hence, according to Jansen, school change can occur most effectively in the context of an external environment that provides high support, as well as high accountability.

However, Jansen's (2002b) representation of the relationship between support and accountability remains steeped in the modernist tradition, as it proposes a singular form of intervention for all schools in all contexts. A more post-modern approach to how accountability and support can be drawn upon to improve schools is couched in Hopkins' typology of the 'growth state of schools' (cited in Muller & Roberts, 2000:10). According to Hopkins, the nature of interventionist strategies for school improvement is dependent upon the condition of the school itself, and not upon a universal formula. Hopkins typifies schools in three categories – failing schools, moderately effective schools and generally effective schools – and recommends intervention strategies appropriate to each school

typology. He proposes, for example, that failing schools require high levels of external support, and that external pressure should be withdrawn for a specified period in order to allow such schools to put their development plans in place (Hopkins, cited in Muller and Roberts 2000) In the case of moderately effective schools, Hopkins proposes that external support needs to be gradually decreased, and directed at building instructional capacity in schools. For the generally effective school, he proposes a transfer of reliance from external support to school-based support networks (Hopkins, cited in Muller and Roberts, 2000:10).

One may argue that Hopkins' typology of schools and proposed interventionist strategies are themselves couched in the language of modernism, as they are also not flexible enough to accommodate all contexts. Because of the legacy of the apartheid past, the South African education system is very heterogeneous in terms of resources, ethos and culture. The transformation agenda of the state may require that other categories (such as equity and redress) be used to typify schools, and for different intervention strategies that are dependent on its policy priorities to be applied to different types of schools. Hence the pressure versus support role of districts is much more complex than has been articulated in the literature and requires greater interrogation, as is undertaken in Chapter 8 of the study.

O'Day and Smith (1993) offer a different perspective to how the relationship between support and accountability may be viewed. They distinguish between two types of accountability: soft accountability and strong accountability. They view soft accountability as 'system-generated improvement efforts that involve proactive steps taken by districts to achieve standards in all schools' (O'Day & Smith, 1993:283). Soft accountability involves specific activities focused directly on ensuring that all schools have the resources and technical assistance to meet school standards. On the other hand, the assumption of strong accountability strategies is that rewards and punishments will motivate both students and educators to higher levels of performance (O'Day & Smith, 1993:286). O'Day and Smith appear to have got around part of the problem of dichotomising support and accountability by embedding notions of 'support' into 'accountability'; however, they do this within the paradigm of accountability. It does not really solve the dilemma of how the *intention* of the two seemingly opposing requirements of support and accountability can be negotiated. This study therefore

includes, as one of its key tasks, an investigation into how district officials find their way, both in practice and in rhetoric, in actualising the support/accountability dichotomy.

2.5 Identifying challenges facing districts

A study on education districts is incomplete without attempting to understand how the literature views the challenges faced by districts in the South African education system. According to De Clerq (2001:11), 'it is widely acknowledged that district performance has thus far been poor'. Fleisch (2002b) attributes this to the fact that many district offices lack the capacity and systems to provide the kinds of services that are required of them. De Clerq (2001) and Roberts (2001) both identify external and internal factors as contributing to this state of affairs. The external factors include aspects such as the lack of district authority over procurement, provisioning, budgetary functions, school personnel appointments and disciplinary powers. A number of researchers (Roberts, 2001; Mphahlele, 1999; Chinsamy, 2000) have pointed to the absence of clear legislation that defines the role and powers of districts as a key limiting factor for making districts function effectively. De Clerq (2001) adds that the lack of coherence, continuity and realism at the level of the provincial head office has impacted negatively on the performance of districts. Internal factors such as the lack of material, physical, financial and human resources have also undermined the ability of districts to support schools. Roberts (2001:7) adds that an outdated organisational culture and ethos within districts has contributed to the inability of districts to provide effective support to schools. A recent Department of Education (2003a:17) report on the current status of districts points to severe staff shortages, long distances between schools and district offices in some provinces, the absence of clear and appropriate delegation from the provincial head office to the district office, the limited capacity of district staff in terms of skills and knowledge, and the absence of an effective model of the district-school interface as factors that impede the effective functioning of districts.

Malcolm (1999:1) points to a different challenge facing districts. He asserts that the new emphasis on learner-centered education demands markedly new approaches to teaching and school management, and hence demands new approaches to school support and district management. He suggests that

> while the traditional skill of the teacher remain, the new curriculum calls for an

> extended view of professionalism, that of teachers as researchers, reflective
> practitioners, intellectuals, political actors and curriculum designers. For the
> district, this implies an intense commitment to teacher development and support,
> as well as new approaches to effective teacher development (Malcolm 1999).

Hence districts face the challenge of providing professional support to teachers, while simultaneously charting their own learning curve.

The literature demonstrates that districts face major organisational and resource challenges that are unlikely to be removed easily. However, there is little analysis in the literature about why these challenges persist in the system. Whether the roots of the problems referred to above are symptomatic of deeper structural weaknesses in the system, or whether they simply lie within the domain of resource constraints and organisational fragility, is a matter explored in Chapter 8 of the study.

2.6 Searching for a district identity

Some researchers have demonstrated a propensity to 'label' districts, and thus confer a form of identity to them. Perhaps this is not surprising since the search for an identity helps people to anchor their understanding of issues through the adoption of easily understandable typologies. Two such district identities have been articulated in the literature: districts as *management units,* and districts as *administrative and support units.*

According to Buckland and De Wee (1996:80), the organisation charts (organograms) of most provincial departments of education provide for the district as a management unit. The term implies that districts carry a management responsibility, which includes that of seeking accountability from schools through the mandates they bring from the head of the education department. Mphahlele (1999), while recognising that districts are at a higher level in the hierarchy than schools, emphasises that districts are administrative and support units. He notes that 'an education district in the South African context could be described as an administrative and support unit which is hierarchically closest to schools' (Mphahlele, 1999:23). Although both Buckland and De Wee (1996) and Mphahlele (1999) accept that districts are in a hierarchical relationship to schools, they place different emphases on the way districts relate to schools. While Mphahlele spotlights a support role for districts, Buckland and De Wee accentuate a supervisory role for

districts.

Interesting, though, is the emphasis placed on the management role of districts by the African National Congress, which at the time was a government in waiting, and which today represents the government of the day. In its *Framework for Education and Training* (ANC, 1994), the ANC refers to a local tier of management which would function by delegation from the provincial governments and which would be under the supervision of the provincial education authorities. The *Framework for Education and Training* proposes that a local tier of management could be made responsible for the 'management and administration of all pre-higher education levels of the education system' (ANC, 1994). The proposal put forward by the ANC on the role of the local level of education clearly leans towards a discourse that tends towards the management and administrative mandates of districts, as opposed to the emerging discourse in the literature of policy and support roles of districts.

The identity conferred upon districts is crucial to this study as it foregrounds the dominant nature of districts. Hence whether stakeholders view districts as administrative units or support units or management units reflect the dominant character that stakeholders ascribe to districts. Whether it is useful to label districts remains a question for this study, given the contested meanings attached to districts and the embeddedness of multiple identities of districts suggested in the literature thus far.

2.7 Conclusion

By examining districts through a variety of portholes, with the discourse on decentralisation providing a central point of focus, this literature review has attempted to obtain both a broad and an in-depth understanding of the existing knowledge base of districts. The decentralisation literature, for instance, provides insights into how the niche that districts occupy in the South African education system can be understood. In addition, it draws attention to the importance of identifying the impulses that drive the establishment of districts in South Africa. Beyond this, in illuminating the distinction between political and administration decentralisation, the decentralisation literature provides a constructive framework within which to characterise education districts in South Africa. To date, little research on districts has been undertaken from the

decentralisation perspective, in South Africa.

In comparing how countries distribute education functions between different levels in a system, the literature reveals the range of choices (theoretically) available in selecting which functions should ideally be allocated to districts, and which goals are achieved in making these choices. For example, greater decentralisation of functions to districts could enhance inequity, and would be ineffective in situations where resource capacity is low. On the other hand, the system could increase its levels of efficiency if decision making on key issues was decentralised to districts. Chapter 5 demonstrates that districts have limited capacity to absorb greater functions and powers within their current resourcing frameworks. It also concludes that there is little interest on the part of district officials for significantly greater autonomy in decision-making.

In its examination of the tensions between the policy, management and service domains that beset public organisations, the literature predicts similar tensions that should be explored in South African education districts. The current South African literature on districts does not adequately explore the tensions inherent in the role of districts, hence the study undertakes this task by examining how districts in practice attempt to steer their way through these tensions.

The school change, school improvement and school effectiveness discourses examined in the literature provide additional windows through which districts are viewed. For example, the new system of school governance in the country facilitates a tangible level of school autonomy, which has important implications for the social relationships between schools and districts, a matter explored in greater detail in Chapter 7. Moreover, the debate in the literature about the apparent dichotomy between support and pressure interventions in improving and changing schools compels this study to interrogate how districts employ these measures in practice (see Chapters 5 and 6), and how these are perceived by stakeholders (see Chapter 7).

Finally, the literature questions whether a single identity can be conferred upon districts. Whether districts can be considered as management units or administrative units or school support units, or whether the search for a singular identity leads one into the trap of 'Aristotelian binary logic' (Adesina, 2003:1), is a matter that is considered in Chapter

8 of this study.

The next chapter traces the origins of education districts in South Africa with a view to unravelling how districts came into being in the South African education system.

Chapter 3

THE ORIGINS AND MEANINGS OF DISTRICTS IN SOUTH AFRICAN EDUCATION DISCOURSE: A HISTORICAL ANALYSIS

3.1 Introduction

This chapter traces the historical trajectory of education districts in South Africa. It explores the nature of local education inherited from the apartheid era, and reviews how districts came into being in South Africa after 1994.

In investigating how the concept of districts became dominant in South African education discourse after 1994, this chapter explores the nature of the debates that had emerged prior to the establishment of post-apartheid education. By examining why there is currently no official policy on districts (despite the present government's preoccupation with policy!),[21] it reveals how the post-apartheid government shed its original vision for a distinct layer of governance at the local level of the system, for a system that mirrored (at least structurally) that of the apartheid era.

 The recent historical trajectory of the development of the South African education sub-system is punctuated by the dramatic political moment, which witnessed the ushering in of a non-racial and democratic system in 1994. Hence this chapter defines 1994 as a central point of departure for tracing developments in the South African education sub-system.

Before I continue, though, it is important to define two key concepts that are frequently

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[21] See the National Education Policy Act (RSA, 1996). The Act empowers the Department of Education to develop national policy over a wide range of education functions. To date, the DoE has developed a many new policies aimed at transforming the education sector in the country.

referred to in this chapter. The notions of *governance* and of *administration* are of particular relevance, as they are often applied in descriptions of districts. For the purposes of this thesis, I have adopted the definition of governance suggested by Buckland and Hofmeyr (1993:1) who propose:

> By governance we understand not simply the system of administration and control, but the whole process by which policies are formulated, adopted, implemented and monitored. Governance is an issue not only at the national level, but also at every level of the system. Because it is centrally concerned with the distribution of power, it is often summed up with the question: who decides?

Hence governance has to do with questions about who should make the decisions, and with how, when and where such decisions should be made. It is closely associated with structures and processes that influence decisions concerning public life. The concept of *governance* is often confused with that of *government.* Over the years, however, the idea of governance has gained wider meaning, and therefore represents a broader notion than government*,* whose principle elements include the legislature, executive and judiciary (Buckland & Hofmeyer, 1993). In this regard, a government is an organisation that has the power to make and enforce laws for a certain territory, while governance deals with the processes and systems by means of which a society operates. Good governance implies that these mechanisms are organised in a way that allows for the rights and interests of stakeholders to be respected by the Executive in a spirit of democracy.

Administration (for the purposes of this thesis) refers to the bureaucratic arm of government: the structures, processes and people deployed by government to carry out the tasks it has laid out for itself. Hence reference to the notion of a district as an administrative unit suggests the absence of an elected decision-making body at the district level, while the idea of districts as governance units implies the existence of an elected constituency to whom districts would be accountable.

3.2 A portrait of the past

Pampallis (2002) observes that prior to the establishment of South Africa's first democratic government in 1994, the governance of the education system was characterised by a peculiar and complex combination of centralisation and decentralisation, based largely on a racial and ethnic motif. Apartheid education, with its rigid ideology of separateness, led to structural complexity and fragmentation as

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education was delivered through separate departments classified according to race and ethnicity. The apartheid system consisted of 19 separate departments of education based on four racial groups[22] the four so-called independent homelands (also known as the TBVC[23] states), the six non-independent homelands[24] (or self-governing territories), and the central Department of National Education (DNE). The DNE was responsible for setting and monitoring national norms and standards across the system.

While the apartheid system consisted of myriad education departments based on race, ethnicity and provincial boundaries, it mirrored no parallel governance structures at the lower levels of the system. Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992:19), for example, observe that since 1910 the education system has always had a poor record of district-level governance. They point to numerous education commissions that identified this problem, and note that many of these commissions had advocated levels of governance closer to the needs and realities of local communities.[25] However, successive governments, including the National Party government, did not act on proposals of these Commissions for the introduction of local-level governance of education.

In its appraisal of the apartheid education system, the NEPI report (1992:13) concludes that 'while there is a proliferation of governance structures … at the higher levels of the system, there are virtually no district-level structures of education governance'. Buckland and de Wee (1996:80) reason that this was not the case since 'the issue of local or district control of education was subsumed under the rhetoric of own education' because 'during the apartheid years the focus of official policy shifted to arguments for and against racially-specific educational provision' and overlooked issues related to vertical decentralisation. However, this was not to say that racially-based education departments did not sub-divide themselves into smaller units for purposes of administrative control.

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[22] Education for each racial group was administered by separate education departments located in the House of Assembly (White), House of Representatives (Coloured), House of Delegates (Indian) and Department of Education and Training (Black). The House of Assembly in turn was made up of four separate education departments based in each of the four provinces that existed in the country at the time.

[23] The TBVC states were: Transkei, Bophutatswana, Venda and Ciskei

[24] The six non-independent homelands were: KwaZulu, KwaNdebele, Lebowa, Gazankulu, QwaQwa and KaNgwane.

[25] Although the National Party government appeared to have paid little attention to the issue of local education, this was not always so in South African education history. Buckland and De Wee (1996:79) point to the many commissions that were established prior to 1948, which recommended decentralisation of education to local or district level. In the Transvaal, these included the Jagger Commission in 1917, the Malherbe Commission in 1920, and the Nicol Commission in 1939.

Buckland and Hofmeyr (1993:17) observe, for example, that 'weaker forms of decentralisation such as deconcentration can be found within the DET, where additional administrative centres were established in each of its seven regions'. However, there were no local or district governance structures with any significant level of power or any accountability to a local constituency. Instead the 19 education departments of the apartheid era had sub-divided themselves into a variety of different formations reflected in area offices, regions and circuits (Interview, Davies, 2003. Behr (1988:67) points out that the Education Affairs Act of 1988 provided for the establishment of regional offices, which served as extensions of the central Head office.

According to Behr (1988:69), regional offices generally carried administrative functions pertaining to the 'proper functioning of schools'. Circuit offices that were staffed by circuit inspectors and education advisors generally served the regional offices. The flow chart of the Department of Education and Training (Behr, 1988:70) confirms its adoption of the idea of regional and circuit offices, while that of education departments in the purportedly self-governing states illustrates the existence of inspection circuits.[26] Hence, the apartheid education sub-system was characterised by numerous units such as regions and circuits that served to keep the administrative machinery of the apartheid system running.

Thus, since 1910, South African education, has had no experience of a system of local education governance. Even under apartheid, the commonality of the 19 education departments was that their sub-divisions were constituted as administration units, not as governance units. Hence any aspirations to create a local system of education governance post-1994 would have undoubtedly required immense political will, and a major overhauling of existing vertical governance relations.

The challenge confronting the post-apartheid government in 1994 was the task of creating a single education system from vastly different entities – entities which at the time were hardly comparable to one another. The new post-apartheid government inherited an education system with sub-structures that were vastly divergent in terms of their organisation, culture of practice and nomenclature (Krige, 1998). The NEPI (1992:11) report also concludes that the civil service of the apartheid system 'is difficult to

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[26] Behr (1988) points out though that variations existed in the sub-structures of education departments in the supposed self-governing.

characterise, as organisational styles and cultures tend to vary from department to department and between different types of bureaucratic corps'. Davies[27] and Boshoff[28] (Interviews, 2004), in reflecting on the colossal education administration inherited from the apartheid era, observe that the differences in administrative systems and sub-systems were massive. (Not that the post-1994 provincial sub-systems are uniform by any means, as the next chapter will demonstrate!). Professor Davies (interview, 2004) points out, for example, that while the House of Representatives had a huge infrastructure in the Western Cape, it had nothing elsewhere in the country. On the other hand, the Department of Education and Training was a relatively small department, which had overarching responsibility over self-governing territories and urban settlements spread across the country.

The inspectors of the apartheid era were notorious for their antagonistic and fear-inducing relationship with most schools in the country, particularly with respect to the DET schools (Hartshorne, 1992; Jansen, 2001). Much of this is related to the excessive control that inspectors exercised over schools. A teacher from a former DET schools recalls that

> we used to shake when inspectors came to schools. They would come into classes and disrupt lessons, and were very tough on us (Interview, teacher 4, 2004).

Even a former Model C school principal expressed negative sentiments about the inspectorate system of the apartheid era. He claims that

> in the past, inspectors terrorised teachers and principals. They tried to run schools directly, and told principals when to brush their teeth (Interview, principal 4, 2004).

The IDS co-ordinator (Interview, 2004) in the district office alleges that

> before 1994, inspectors visited schools on faultfinding missions, and not to support schools, thereby creating much fear among teachers and principals.

The inspectorate prior to 1994 also undertook evaluation of teachers for the purposes of confirmation and promotion, while currently teacher appointments are recommended by SGBs. The shift from a tightly controlled and highly prescriptive system to a more self-reliant and less commanding school system after 1994 is reflected in the statement by a principal from a former DET school who points out that

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[27] Professor Hugh Davies was previously the Superintendent General of the House of Assembly, and became   Director General of the Education Coordination Service (ECS) in 1992. The ECS was tasked to investigate how the different education departments in the system were organised and structured, and how they could be unified in a new political dispensation.
[28] Advocate Boshoff is an official in the legal services Directorate of the DoE. He was absorbed into the DoE in 1995.

> prior to 1994, we expected the Department to do everything; now we have learned to do things for ourselves. The Department now encourages schools to take their own initiative (Interview, principal 6, 2004).

The inspectorate of the apartheid era was disliked intensely by most schools. Inspectors were widely reputed as being corrupt and perceived to be puppets of the apartheid regime (Hartshorne, 1992). By the 1980s, the inspectoral system had collapsed in most parts of the country, although officials still occupied their posts. Speaking from his experience of the then DET, Hartshorne (1992:49) points out that at the end of March 1990

> not a single school in Soweto was functioning. Inspector staff and subject advisors had lost touch completely with what was going on in schools, and it was admitted privately in the regional office, that the Department had no control over the situation.

Manganyi (Interview, 2005) confirms that the destruction of education monitoring and inspection in South African education left a vacuum that needed to be filled by the new government. The absence of a monitoring system in the country was recognised by the Committee of Heads of Departments (HEDCOM)[29] in February 1998, when it expressed concern that 'the capacity to monitor and evaluate school effectiveness was inadequate and suggested that it should be investigated and improved' (DoE, 1999a). In response to these concerns HEDCOM decided, at its meeting in February 1998, to engage research agencies to conduct an audit of quality assurance activities in the nine provincial education departments. It also noted the establishment of a Ministerial Committee that would analyse the findings and recommendations of the audit and propose a national policy framework on quality assurance matters (DoE, 1999a). A national quality assurance audit was undertaken by research agencies (the CEPD and the Wits Education Policy Unit), however it did not lead to any policy process directed at re-examining local education (DoE: 1999d). Instead, it resulted in the establishment of a national system of quality assurance, which to date, has focused on the identification of indicators for monitoring the national level of the system (DoE: 1999e) and the development of policies on Systemic Evaluation and Whole School Evaluation.

By 1990, it was clear to both the apartheid government and the liberation movements that an alternative vision needed to be in place for a complete overhaul of the apartheid education system. The development of such a vision for a post-apartheid system of

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[29] HEDCOM is a structure comprising the Heads of the nine provincial education departments as well as the Head of the national Department of Education.

education occurred in two broad parallel processes. On the one hand, the then apartheid government established its own structures and commissions in its search for alternatives; on the other, the ANC and its allies began formulating their own proposals on education.

3.3 Preparing for the future: post–1990

In 1992 the apartheid government officially proposed its vision of a new education system in a widely publicised publication (which was strongly contested by the anti-apartheid movement), the *Education Renewal Strategy* (ERS). The ERS (DNE 1992:23) proposed two tiers of education governance, a 'central education authority, and regionally-based departments of education'. In addition, it floated the idea of a third tier of governance, at the *school* level of the system. It was silent about local or district levels of governance. Despite its reference to administration decentralisation (DNE, 1992:22), it did not articulate a vision for lower levels of management or administration.

By the end of 1993, the Education Co-ordination Services (ECS) – a co-ordination structure established by the National Party government, began seriously considering how the disparate 19 education departments could be unified. It proposed that the government be cautious about abolishing the existing regions and circuits of the education system, but added that there needed to be clarity about the powers of such structures. Regions and circuits were viewed as being important conduits of government policy, and there was even the view at the time that there should be some uniformity and standardisation of departmental sub-structures across the country (Interview, Davies, 2004).

One of the earliest policy proposals on the local level of education from the anti-apartheid movement emerged from the National Education Policy Investigation (NEPI, 1992), which was a project of the National Education Co-ordinating Committee (NECC), a significant education organisation of the anti-apartheid movement in the 1980s and 1990s. NEPI conceptualised local education from a dual perspective – that of both administration and governance. NEPI proposed two policy perspectives[30] on education administration and governance, a *system* perspective and a *school governance*

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[30] NEPI uses the term 'perspectives' rather than 'options' to describe their two proposals for the structure of education governance, as they had many elements in common and differed only in terms of their starting points.

perspective. 'The system perspective involves seeing the administration and control of schools as part of the governance of education in general…' (NEPI, 1992:37), while the school governance perspective has as its starting point the 'democratisation of school governance and the role of civil society in that process' (NEPI, 1992:44). Both perspectives envisaged a four-tier system of education governance: national, regional (which in today's language could be understood to be provincial), local (or district, as it is sometimes described in the system perspective) and institutional.

The system perspective proposed the establishment of a political authority at the local level of the system, supported by an administrative structure and accompanied by a stakeholder-driven consultative structure. It advocated '*elected*[31] District Education Authorities supported by consultative District Education Forums and District Education Administrative structures for the district level of the system (NEPI, 1992). It envisaged the transfer of significant local autonomy to districts that could demonstrate both the capacity and the willingness to take on the local management of education. District-level policy formulation and adoption was proposed as being the role of the District Education Authority (with the power to adopt district-level statutes and regulations), while district policy implementation was seen to be the role of the District Education Administration. NEPI also proposed that districts could conduct their own inspections and monitoring of internal standards if they had negotiated autonomy over this policy area. However, it argued that external examinations were to remain the prerogative of the regional and national levels of the system.

In its vision of the governance and administration of education, the system approach of NEPI draws on policy as its starting point. The design of its proposed structures is driven by its 'fixation' with questions about decision-making and responsibility of policy processes at the different levels of the system, rather than with the details of organisational structure. This was understandable, however, given the preoccupation of the democratic movement with ensuring the participation of a previously disenfranchised society in education and other matters. Hence, in NEPI's system approach, bureaucrats at the local level were expected to be accountable to elected officials rather than to bureaucrats at the higher level of the system, thereby privileging the governance domain of education over the domain of administration.

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[31] My emphasis. NEPI does not detail who would comprise the district electorate, or where members of this electorate would be sourced.

The systemic approach adopted by NEPI also suggests a high level of devolution of authority to the local level of the education system, while maintaining 'a strong equalising role for the central state' (NEPI, 1992:44). For example, in addition to districts being accorded the power to develop their own legislation and regulations (within the framework of national and regional policy), NEPI also advised that districts could supplement state financial provisioning from their own resources (NEPI, 1992:41). NEPI's system perspective on governance and administration was therefore characterised by strong elements of devolution and participatory governance.

While the systemic approach proposed by NEPI separated the different policy processes of formulation, adoption, implementation and monitoring in the different parts of the education system, its *school governance* perspective proposed 'a single structural hierarchy with differentiation in the modes of participation in the governance process' (NEPI, 1992:47). In simple language, this perspective offered the idea of a single entity, representing both stakeholder and government interests. This perspective advocated that the unit of governance at the local level be a school board, constituted on a tripartite basis with representatives from Parent-Teacher-Student Associations (PTSAs) from schools in the defined locality, government officials and representatives of student, parent and teacher organisations. It provided for school boards to have important functions such as the appointment of teachers, the development of local-level policy and the equitable utilisation of education resources. One of the key limitations of the school governance perspective is that it bypasses issues surrounding the administration and management of education at this level. For example, in referring to the composition of the school board, it did not specify how 'representation from government officials' was expected to take place – it was silent on how it envisaged the education bureaucracy to be structured, and how accountability was expected to occur. It also failed to distinguish adequately between the roles of the different structures it envisaged. In effect, NEPI's school governance perspective, quite like the systemic perspective, was high on governance and low on administration and management in its proposals for a model of education administration and governance.

A closer examination of NEPI's two perspectives on local education suggests a number of key underlying common features. Firstly, both perspectives emphasise the need for a

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local (district) layer of governance in the system. In doing so, NEPI attempted to promote the widest possible participation of all constituencies in the governance of education. Secondly, the local layer of education was visualised as being fairly autonomous – having authority to develop district-level policy and even legislation, raise funds and distribute resources to schools. Both approaches attempted to accommodate the complex relationship between management and governance through the establishment of separate structures that would reflect management as well as representation modes, but which would converge at a common point at each level of the system.

However, while the system perspective distinguishes structures responsible for policy formulation and adoption and policy implementation, the school governance perspective tends to blur the enactment of policy processes between the different structures. A somewhat interesting element of the NEPI proposals is that both perspectives hesitate to foreground the relationship between local education and local government, though minor reference is made (in the system perspective) of the possibility of District Education Authorities being part of local government (NEPI, 1992:41).

The ANC, like its ally, the NECC, was also keen to introduce an intermediary layer of governance between schools and provinces. It believed that such structures would be useful in deracialising and democratising the education system. Karlsson *et al.* (1996) argue that the ANC was concerned primarily with the redistributive role that this level of the system could play in overcoming the historical legacy of inequity in resources such as sports facilities and skilled teachers between schools. The draft *Policy Framework for Education and Training* (ANC, 1994), which articulates the ANC vision of a post-apartheid education system, proposes that 'there will be a single national education and training system with four levels of *governance*: national, provincial, *local* and institutional' (ANC, 1994:23). Although the ANC envisaged a **local** level of governance linked to local government for the new education system, it did so cautiously, by noting that 'although local governance and management structures have an important role to play…., the form, role and powers of such structures, and their relationship to local government, if any, have still to be clarified through further investigation and consultation'. The ANC (1994:25) further spelled out that 'the responsibilities, if any, of elected local governments in the sphere of education and training are not yet clear'. It did, however, accede that there was scope for a local tier of *management* by delegation from

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provincial governments (ANC, 1994:25).

The ANC appears to have adopted a somewhat pragmatic stance in its policy towards the local tier of education. In one section of its *Policy Framework for Education and Training* (ANC, 1994:23), it proposed a local tier of *governance* for the education system, possibly linked to the system of local government, while in another section (ANC, 1994:25), it referred to the possibility of 'a local tier of *management* … by delegation from the provincial governments and under the supervision of the Provincial Education and Training Authorities'. The rather open-ended stance of the ANC reflects its somewhat ambiguous and vague position on local education. In one sense, its position is probably a product of the uncertainty surrounding the possible outcomes of the constitutional negotiations that dominated education policy thinking at the time. On the other hand, it could be a reflection of the uncertainty with which the ANC approached its policy on local education. Coombe (Interview, 1995) confirms that

> there was much constitutional uncertainty in the period that the ANC proposals on education were drafted, and that it was impossible to predict whether there would be a role for education in the local government system under the new Constitution.

An important consideration in this instance is that proposals for local education were subject to the outcomes of political negotiations being conducted by political groupings in the Congress for a Democratic South Africa (CODESA), a body created in the 1990s to facilitate the transition from apartheid to democracy. Nonetheless, the ANC conceptualised its vision of the 'district' more as a tier of governance (with potential connections to local government) rather than a tier of management or administration of provincial education departments, though (as mentioned above) such a possibility was articulated almost as an afterthought. Indeed, the ANC *Policy Framework* (1994) conferred little attention to the management and administration domains of education, but instead foregrounded the realm of education governance.

Coombe (Interview, 2005) explains that the ANC's proposed policy framework on education did not detail management and administrative issues partly because

> there was real perplexity, and virtual ignorance on the part of those who were formulating policy on how public administration worked, owing to their lack of experience.

Moreover, Coombe (Interview, 2005) adds that 'the dominant discourse then was about

achieving legitimacy through democratic expression of the public', and the 'comrades were struggling to formulate proposals in the absence of a settled Constitution'. Coombe's admission to the limited focus on administrative issues on the part of the ANC is supported by Fleisch (2002a:26) who points out that policy researchers paid little attention to 'the actual structuring of specialist functions, such as the provision of administration and support services, or the demarcation of administration units'.

There also appeared to be little clarity regarding the distinction between governance and administration at this level of the education system. A study carried out by Karlsson *et al.* (1996) found that most stakeholders, in particular the ANC and its allies, supported the idea of at least one intermediary level of governance between schools and provinces. They add, though, that many of the stakeholders had not formulated definite ideas about the nature and composition of the governance structure at the regional/district/circuit level of the system. Karlsson *et al.* (1996) attribute this to the lack of prior experience on the part of stakeholders about governance at this level of the system. Karlsson *et al.* (1996:53) note, for example, that both the NECC and the South African Democratic Teachers Union (SADTU) only referred to administrative functions (rather than governance ones) in articulating their understanding of the local level of the education system. For instance, the NECC highlighted the role of intermediary structures as implementation arms of provincial education departments – those that 'would adapt provincial plans into local implementable programmes', rather than structures that would be responsive to local constituencies.

The debate on local education in circles outside of the apartheid government, therefore, emerged from a governance perspective rather than an administrative one. Hence preparations by the anti-apartheid movement for managing and administering South African education were inadequate with regards to the conceptualisation and design of the new education bureaucracy. By 1994, therefore, there was limited vision of how the education bureaucracy would be constituted at the lower levels of the system.

3.4 The future arrives

Soon after 1994, events such as the adoption of the new Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), and the urgency and complexity of establishing a unitary system of national and

provincial education overtook the debate on the local governance of education. Krige (1998) argues that the process of moving the administration of education from 19 racially determined education departments to nine spatially determined provincial departments was one of the biggest major restructuring processes that the new South African government had to deal with. However, this is not to downplay the massive task of unification faced by other sectors of government, and other government departments had similar experiences to that of education. The Department of Health, however, followed a different route to that of Education in its consideration of the local level of its system. Instead of discounting the local level of service delivery, it foregrounded the importance of a district health system and established district health structures as central to its service delivery strategy (see Chapter 4 for details).

The Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), which was a product of high-level and intense political negotiations, allowed for three layers of political governance, namely, the national, provincial and local spheres. Interestingly enough, the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) permitted the function of education to be distributed across all three spheres of governance. (Note that this is not case in the final Constitution, where the function of education is allocated to only the national and provincial spheres of government – see Chapter 4 for details). However, while Schedule 6 of the Interim Constitution compels the national and provincial spheres of government to have concurrent responsibility for pre-tertiary education, it does not compel, but merely makes it possible for local government to absorb education functions. Section 175 (3) of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) in particular states that:

> A Local Government shall, to the extent determined by any applicable law, make provision for access by all persons residing within its area of jurisdiction, to water, sanitation, electricity, EDUCATION (my emphasis), primary health services, housing………provided that such services and amenities can be rendered in a sustainable manner and are financially and physically practicable.

A reading of the above suggests that the Interim Constitution places the onus on local government to decide whether it has the financial and other means to provide for education on a sustainable basis. The final Constitution (RSA, 1996) on the other hand, passes on the decision about any role for local government in education, to provinces, through the legal mechanism of 'assignment' (see Chapter 4 for details). The changes made to the final Constitution regarding the role of local government in education, suggests reluctance on the part of the post-1994 government to empower local

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government structures to take on education functions. This disinclination could be ascribed to the recognition by the new government, of low levels of capacity in local government to absorb too many functions, particularly those like education, that have not had a history of local government involvement.

An additional point about the Interim Constitution is that it makes no reference to the possibility for an additional layer of education governance, thereby placing the issue of district governance in the background of education transformation processes.

The establishment of provincial departments of education was undertaken in terms of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), which empowered provinces to establish their own administrative structures with facilitation by the Public Service Commission (PSC). The Interim Constitution granted much authority to the PSC with respect to provincial organisation. Section 210 (1) of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), for example, notes that the Commission 'shall be competent to make recommendations, give directions and conduct enquiries with regard to:

     (i)   the organisation and administration of departments and the public service;
     (iv)   the promotion of efficiency and effectiveness in departments and the public
           service'.

Section 210 (3) of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) further spelled out that a recommendation or direction of the Commission should be implemented by the appropriate person or institution within six months – and could only be rejected under particular conditions, namely:

     (a)   if the recommendations or directions of the Commission are rejected by the
           President, or
     (b)   if they involved approval from Treasury for the expenditure of public funds
           (adapted from Section 210 (3) (a) (b) of the Interim Constitution).

The Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) was therefore clear about the guardianship role of the PSC in provincial administration and organisation. Provincial departments were expected to seek approval of their organograms from both the provincial cabinet and the PSC (Interview, Davies, 2004). Provinces also established Provincial Service Commissions that supported them in the establishment and organisation of their departments.[32] This was undertaken in terms of Section 213 of the Interim Constitution,

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[32] The Pretoria-Witwatersrand-Vereeniging (PWV) provincial legislature passed the Provincial Service Commission Bill in 1994, which mandated the Provincial Service Commission 'to make recommendations,

which provides for provinces to establish Provincial Commissions that would have similar competencies to the PSC. Provincial education departments were thus accountable to the PSC (or Provincial Commissions, where they existed), rather than the national Department of Education with respect to their organisational and administrative structures.

In the absence of a national role in the determination of provincial structures, each provincial education department went about the process of organising and structuring themselves in their own way. Some provinces established specialised task teams to set up their education structures, while others such as Limpopo obtained external advisors from Tanzania to assist them to develop their organograms. KwaZulu-Natal sought the advice of individual consultants in their efforts to organise and structure themselves. Consultants from tertiary institutions did much work in the offices of the MECs in KwaZulu-Natal and Gauteng,[33] and the former Head of the KwaNdebele Department of Education played a significant role in Mpumalanga. Both the PSC and the Finance and Fiscal Commission (FFC) also played significant roles in the structuring efforts of provinces. Much of this was in the form of advice regarding post levels proposed by the education departments (Interview, Davies, 2004).

The burning question that comes to mind, however, is, what was the role of the Department of Education during this tumultuous period?

According to Davies (Interview, 2004), although the national Department had hoped to provide a framework for the organisation of provinces, it played a minimal role in the restructuring endeavours of provincial education departments in 1994 because of, among other reasons, the limitations placed by the Interim Constitution. Coombe (Interview, 2005) confirms that the Interim Constitution greatly influenced DoE thinking on local education in the 1994-1995 period. This, according to Coombe, occurred in two ways. Firstly, the Interim Constitution's exclusion of local government from education functions 'wiped out any consideration of a local governance tier for education'. Secondly, the statutory authority of the PSC in provincial administration foreclosed DoE

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give directions and conduct inquiries with regard to the establishment and organisation of departments of the province' (PWV Legislature, 1994).
[33] Clive Harper a senior staff member of the University of Natal assisted in KwaZulu-Natal (Interview, Davies, 2004), while Patrick Fitzgerald, a public service specialist from the University of Witwatersrand assisted the GDE in the unification process (Interview, Coombe, 2005).

rights in provincial organisational development. Indeed, an examination of the minutes of HEDCOM meetings held between 1995 and 2000 indicates that there were almost no discussions at the national level about matters pertaining to local-level education structures (DoE, 1995c; 1996; 1997; 1998; 1999a; 1999b; 1999c).

The DoE did, however, establish a Provincialisation Task Team (PTT) in December 1994, which played a major role in prodding the transfer of education administration and management functions from the apartheid education departments to the newly established provincial education departments. The major aim of the PTT was, according to Dirk Meiring,[34] the then Head of the PTT, 'to create provincial head offices, not provincial sub-systems'; it focused on the task of education transfer rather than education restructuring (Interview, Meiring, 2005). The PTT assisted provincial education departments in human resource issues, administrative systems, logistics, information technology and the installation of common databases (such as PERSAL, the personnel salary system). across the provinces. It used the mechanism of an 'agency' in 1995 to absorb staff, documentation and other resources of the former education departments into the PTT. According to Meiring (interview, 2005), the Agency Co-ordination Structure (ACS) focused on the capacity building of provincial officials, and the development of management systems, procedures and infrastructure for the eventual take-over of functions from the relinquishing departments. The Agency, however, was, in terms of decisions adopted by HEDCOM and the Council of Education Ministers (CEM), only permitted to act upon the instruction of provinces, and not initiate their own actions. Hence the ACS did not involve itself with the restructuring efforts of provinces. Only two provinces, Western Cape and Free State, requested assistance from the ACS on their regional structures (Interview, Meiring, 2005).

In essence, therefore, the PTT played a minimal role in establishing new provincial organisational structures (either individually, or collectively); instead it understood its mandate to be the absorption the 'old into the new', and to facilitate the transfer of functions from the old education departments to the new ones. The PTT assisted provinces to develop the crucial and effective administrative systems and infrastructure to manage those functions, which were identified as critical by the CEM. These were obviously functions to be executed by the new provincial head office structures. In fact,

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[34] Dirk Meiring was the Head of the former DET, and Deputy Director-General in the newly established DoE.

by agreement, no functions could be transferred to the new provincial departments unless the necessary systems were in place and the necessary qualified staff had been absorbed or appointed (Interview, Meiring, 2005).

According to Meiring (Interview, 2005), the then Minister of Education, Professor Sibusiso Bengu, was keen on establishing influence on the structuring efforts of provinces but could not steer developments from the national level, as he was at the same time sensitive to the 'autonomy' of provinces. In retrospect, the Minister could have engaged with structures such as HEDCOM and the CEM to debate ideas on the local level of education; alternatively, provincial Heads of Department and MECs could themselves have initiated discussion on this matter. However, this did not occur, as indicated in meetings of HEDCOM held between 1995 and 2000 (see reference to HEDCOM meetings above). Meiring (Interview, 2005) confirms that neither HEDCOM nor CEM raised the issue of a common education sub-system in any substantial way.

According to Davies (Interview, 2004), the absence of permanent appointees to these structures and other priorities of the provinces precluded any significant discussion on the matter of local education. In addition, the structuring of the new provincial education departments was linked closely with the establishment and allocation of posts, a function for which the PSC was responsible.[35] Hence, the promotion of common structures for all provincial education departments posed huge challenges at a time when each province had to function within its own budgetary constraints, and within the legacy of its own staffing profiles. Moreover, the national policy environment in the period immediately following the April 1994 elections was itself subject to major contestations.

Coombe (Interview, 2005) recalls that in the first few months after the elections, there was no Department of Education as it is now known; instead 'it was the old apartheid structures with a Minister placed on top of it'. He adds that 'all the old structures were alive and kicking and there was much jockeying for influence with the new Minister of Education'. Although the Minister had established a Strategic Management Team (SMT) made up of people from the democratic movement to advise him on new policy directions, the SMT had no legal authority and, according to Coombe (Interview, 2005),

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[35] Section 210 (1) (a) (iii) of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) stipulates that 'the appointment, promotion, transfer and discharge of members of the public service and matters connected with the employment of personnel' is the competence of the PSC.

'operated through force of personality and the goodwill of existing officials'. The focus and energy of the SMT in the first few months after April 1994 was the development of the Education White Paper (RSA: 1995) as it was seen 'as the most sensible and rational way to proceed' (Interview, Coombe, 2005).

In prioritising the implications of the new Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) for education and in charting the untested terrain of providing form to the relationship between national and provincial spheres of government, the White Paper did not take into account the local tier of education governance. Both Coombe (Interview, 2005) and Manganyi (Interview, 2005) claim that since the DoE had to locate itself within the framework of the Interim Constitution, the White Paper focused on national and provincial governance relations, as opposed to local education matters. The second major pre-occupation of the DoE at the time was the issue of schools. Coombe (Interview, 2005) reminds us that 'achieving a legislative basis for a national schooling system was a dominant priority, because racially divided schools had become a political flashpoint and there were real threats of violence from the Right on the one hand, and invasion of White schools by Black students on the other'. Coombe (Interview, 2005) adds that the process for legislating on schools 'could not be done summarily, since Section 247 of the Interim Constitution stipulated that the legal status of former White schools be negotiated individually by the DoE'.

An examination of Section 247 of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) suggests that it did indeed protect the governance systems of former White schools by stipulating that:

> the national government and the provincial government … shall not alter the rights, powers and functions of the governing bodies, management councils or similar authorities of departmental, community-managed or state-aided primary or secondary schools under laws existing immediately before the commencement of this constitution, unless an agreement resulting from bona-fide negotiations has been reached with such bodies and reasonable notice of any proposed alteration has been given.

In lieu of this, the Department of Education held over 350 meetings across the country in 1994, to deal with issues of governance in former White schools (Interview, Manganyi, 2005). Davies (Interview, 2004), however, believes that despite these challenges, the DoE lost an opportunity to establish a uniform sub-system of education in the first few months of its establishment.

The demands of education service delivery prompted provincial education departments to

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concentrate on their mandate, which was, in the main, to ensure that the system was kept running. Boshoff (Interview, 2004) notes that many of the new provincial departments of education 'used pre-1994 sub-structures to deal with administrative issues'. He adds that although these structures were not perfect, they provided for a basic level of functionality. Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992:19) predicted the continued utilisation of the apartheid bureaucracy post-1994, and in 1992 cautioned that 'most of the existing bureaucrats will have to be used in the future to keep the administrative machinery of the new system running'. Kruss (1997), however, expresses concern about the continuity of apartheid structures into the new system. Writing from her experience of the Western Cape education department, Kruss (1997:96) complains that 'the expertise of the former Cape Education Department has become a justification for many of its divisions and personnel to provide the administrative basis for the new Ministry'. Tensions between preservation and transformation were therefore rife. In attempting to embrace the challenge of keeping the system running, while simultaneously trying to fix it, education departments appear to have had, on the face of it, no choice, but to continue to function with some components of their original system relatively intact.

Several provincial education departments had established their new structures by 1995/996,[36] while many others such as Eastern Cape and North West provinces restructured themselves much later (Interview, Boshoff, 2004). The complexity of the transition was such that most of the apartheid education departments relinquished all their functions and staff to the new provincial education departments only by July 1996 (Meiring, 1998).[37] Until then, education was run simultaneously by the new provincial departments, as well as by the former apartheid departments. Even by June 1995, no functions had moved from the former education departments to the new provinces (Interview, Meiring, 2005). This could be attributed to the fact that the heads of relinquishing departments remained accounting officers to the national treasury for their respective budgets up to March 1995 (Meiring, 1998:97). In addition, the apartheid legislation of the former education departments was only withdrawn in 1996 (Interview, Meiring, 2005).

The period of transition, therefore, offered little opportunity for newly created, activist-

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[36] For example, Gauteng and Northern Cape.

[37] The transfer of education functions from the former departments to the new provinces was not a once-off event. Provinces took on functions gradually, as their capacity to do so grew (Interview, Meiring, 2005)

oriented strategic management teams and transition task teams working in the offices of the MECs to focus on administration and management issues. Meiring (1998:95) expresses no surprise in observing that '1994 can be characterised as the period in which more attention was given to the political and provisioning aspects of education, and less to the establishment of sound and functioning managerial practices and systems'. It is even less surprising to note that the sub-structures of former education departments continued to exist in many provinces well into the 1995/1996 period.

Despite provincial initiatives to establish their own administrative sub-divisions, calls for a local tier of governance persisted. For example, the report of the *Committee to Review the Organisation, Governance and Funding of Schools*[38] (DoE, 1995) recommended that 'provincial authorities will also establish district and local governance structures …. District level governance structures must have representation by officials of the provincial department, parents, teachers, learners and members of the community' (DoE, 1995b:53). The Department, however, paid little attention to these recommendations of the Hunter Committee. Instead it focused on those aspects of the report that dealt with matters of school governance, and ignored those advocating the need for local or district governance structures.

In 1995, the Centre for Education Policy Development (a research arm of the ANC at the time) expressed concern that 'the establishment of governance structures between schools … and the provincial level had received little attention in national policy development' (Coombe & Godden, 1996:1). This disquiet was expressed in a context where provincial departments of education had already embarked on establishing their own administrative structures and systems. The CEPD attempted to place the local governance of education back on the agenda by hosting a major national colloquium on local education governance in June 1995. However, there appeared to be little interest on the part of the new government to take on the challenges of introducing a system of local governance as it would have involved dramatic changes to the existing system. Advocate Boshoff (Interview, 2004) observes that the priority in that period was to ensure the establishment of non-racial national and provincial departments of education, which unified the racially based 19 departments of education into a single system. In addition, the Interim

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[38] This committee was established by the then Minister of Education, Professor Bengu (DoE, 1995), and chaired by Professor Peter Hunter. In South African education circles, it is commonly referred to as the Hunter Committee.

Constitution (RSA, 1993) brought pressure to bear on the national Department of Education to provide for the governance of schools, rather than local education, which in itself was an extremely politically fraught and complex undertaking.

The lack of attention to local education in the period following the 1994 elections can be explained from both legal and rational dimensions. Legal explanations for the 'neglect' of lower levels of the education system seem to lie with the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), which directed the new government to deal with matters of institutional governance, and national and provincial governance relations, rather than local governance. And the powers in provincial organisation accorded to the PSC by the Interim Constitution undercut a potentially dominant role that the centre could have played in directing the nature and form of local education in South Africa. However, as is discussed later in this chapter as well as in the next one, the Interim Constitution did not actively *prevent* the centre from playing a more co-ordinating and facilitative role, or for that matter a policy role, in shaping the form and nature of local education in South Africa. The rational explanation for the indifference demonstrated by the new government towards local education appears to lie with the challenge of dealing with change. The element of the system that seemed to require the least refurbishing (at least, at the time), and which would have been the most complex to change (given the role of the PSC in provincial organisation, and the lack of prior experience in local level education governance and government administration), appears to have been the local tier of education.

3.5   Tracing the origins of the term 'districts'

The term 'district' is ubiquitous in contemporary South African education policy discourses.[39] However, its usage is not inherited from the apartheid era, nor was it a strongly fore-grounded concept in the policy texts of the democratic movement prior to 1994 (see above). So how did 'districts' come to represent the dominant discourse for local education in the country? Although this question is but of minor importance to this study, the story of districts begs for a beginning, and the opening lines need to explain how the idea of districts came about.

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[39] This is evidenced in many policy texts (for example, that on Whole School Evaluation and Inclusive Education) of the Department of Education.

In searching for a beginning though, one discovers that there are multiple starting points to the origins to the concept of 'districts'. This is so because each of the nine provinces engaged in individual debates about their organisational forms. In Gauteng, for example, Fleisch (2002) observes that the Strategic Management Team adopted the idea of 'districts' to neutralise power blocks in the apartheid bureaucracies, which existed in the then existing circuits and area offices.

This study though, confines itself to a national perspective on how the idea of districts came into being, as the national discourse did influence (as chapter 4 demonstrates), though in a limited way, the adoption of the idea of districts by provincial education departments.

Davies (Interview, 2004) recalls that the term district

> emerged in the education debates of the post-1990 period; it was not a term that was used, it certainly wasn't used in the House of Assembly where I worked.

He recalls that the House of Assembly comprised 'school board areas', while the Department of Education and Training was sub-divided into regions and area offices. The education department in the House of Representatives was constituted of regions, while the House of Delegates consisted of regions and circuit offices. According to Davies, only one education department (of the 19 that existed at the time), namely the Venda Department of Education, used the term districts to describe its administrative sub-divisions.

Davies (Interview, 2004), believes that the use of the term district became dominant in education circles since 1992 when stakeholders from across the political spectrum began exploring options for a post-apartheid system of education. He suggests that

> the term 'district' was borrowed from the US; that it began to be used as part of the debate when people were looking quite seriously at American schools; and that it was not engineered in South Africa at all.

Manganyi (Interview, 2005) expresses no surprise at the adoption of a 'foreign' term to represent the local tier of education. He points out that 'South African policy making was not only home-grown, it had many international connections'. However, Coombe (Interview, 2005) contends that it is not entirely correct to conclude that the concept of

districts was imported from outside the country, and points out that District Councils have existed for a long time as part of local government structures in South Africa. In the historical context of education, the notion of education districts is not entirely new. Indeed, if one travels as far back as 1917, both the Jagger Commission, which was established by the Union of South Africa, as well as the Malherbe Commission, established by the then Transvaal government, advocated the idea of education district councils (Buckland & Hofmeyr, 1992). The Jagger Commission recommended 'the establishment of District Councils that would be responsible for the administration of government decisions, but with a fair amount of autonomy with respect to detail', while the Malherbe Commission proposed the idea of 'district councils with financial responsibility, in an attempt to create more local involvement in education' (Buckland & Hofmeyr, 1992:22,23).

Advocacy for education districts by various government Commissions continued up to 1981.[40] In that year, the De Langa Report

> suggested the idea of local school districts consisting of groupings of schools, as units of management smaller than regions. The districts were seen as cooperative rather than controlling mechanisms, and based on the principle of free association (Buckland & Hofmeyr,1992:27).

Despite the advocacy of districts as important levels of the education system by many of the above-mentioned Commissions, the stream of governments that established these Commissions did not adopt their propositions. Hence, while the idea of education districts is not entirely new in South African education history; it has always remained as such – merely an idea in text. Since 1910, therefore, the term districts never really occupied a meaningful place in the South African education system.

On the side of the democratic movement, one of the first policy texts that referred to the idea of districts (albeit in conjunction with the term 'local'), were the NEPI policy options on local education (see earlier section). The ANC (1994:23) *Draft Policy Framework for Education and Training* used the term 'local' rather than 'districts' to describe the third tier of governance that it envisaged for the new education system. However, in its more detailed depiction of the system, it does make passing reference to districts to describe the

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[40] In 1939, the Nicol Commission in the Transvaal also reconfirmed a belief in the local control of education (Buckland & Hofmeyr, 1992:24).

role of the local level of the education system.[41]

Both the NEPI and ANC policy proposals, therefore, were indefinite about the adoption of the term districts to characterise local education. Even the title of the landmark colloquium organised by the CEPD in June 1995 to look into local education, *Local/district Governance in Education*, is indicative of a lack of commitment to the idea of districts as a term to describe the local tier of education, though it retains the commitment to the idea of a level of governance between schools and provinces.

Post-1990 thinking on districts therefore, has always been unclear, ambiguous and lacking in definition. There was never complete commitment to the usage of districts as a term to describe local-level education, and its application consistently co-existed with the idea of 'local-level' education.

3.6 Conclusion

This chapter concludes by highlighting several significant findings about the origins of districts in South Africa. It has drawn attention to the vision of local education articulated by those in the liberation movement in the 1990s. It has also revealed that this vision was not always clear; rather it tended to be clouded with uncertainty and lack of attention to detail. This can be largely attributed to the inexperience on the part of researchers and policy makers in public administration, and the uncertainties surrounding political negotiations on the new Constitution.

In the post-1994 period, the attention directed to school-level governance deflected attention away from local-level governance. In addition, stipulations of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) directed the responsibility of establishing provincial government departments to provinces and the Public Service Commission, thereby reducing the role of national government in matters of local administration and governance.

Both the colonial and apartheid governments, as well as key constituencies in the

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[41] The *Policy Framework* (1994:23) proposes that 'local governance and management structures have an important role to play in planning and co-ordinating education at district or local level….'

democratic movement, had flirted with the possibility of a role for local government at the local level of the envisioned education system. In the case of the post-1994 period, the discourse of local education *governance* rather than local level *administration or management* continued to dominate policy rhetoric because the former was not constitutionally viable in terms of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), Provinces, through default rather than conscious engagement, continued to function with the local system of administration they inherited from the apartheid era.

The next chapter will demonstrate why the new government did not radically intrude into the form of local education that had been inherited from the apartheid government. The structures of the new local education system took on a similar form and shape to what existed before; one that largely mirrored the administrative formations created by former education departments.

This chapter also explored the origins of the term 'districts', given that the district discourse was not one inherited from the apartheid era, nor was it particularly prominent or distinctive in the policy discourse of the democratic movement.[42] In the recent past, the district discourse appeared to have percolated into the discussions and debates that emerged when alternatives for a post-apartheid education system were being explored, rather than adopted as a definite policy measure by policy makers. Throughout the transition period, the district discourse remained vague, ambiguous, undefined and indeterminate. Much of this haziness stemmed from the uncertainty surrounding the role of local government in education, which was more of a Constitutional matter. However, it is also reflective of a tendency, particularly on the part of the democratic movement, to privilege governance at the expense of administration. Many stakeholders appear to have appropriated the term districts to describe the local level of the education system, as it reflected a desire on their part to adopt a local system of education governance that enhanced local-level participation in education (possibly through the system of local government), as opposed to envisaging districts as administrative field units of provincial education departments.

Though ideas for local governance in education were advocated for by a range of different education role-players throughout the course of South African education history,

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[42] I refer here particularly to the ANC and NEPI education policy proposals.

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these were not taken seriously by any of the ruling parties. Nor has the present government been particularly responsive to calls for a tier of local education governance. This chapter has demonstrated that the vision of an intermediate layer of governance between schools and provinces, as articulated by many stakeholders prior to 1994 and in the immediate period thereafter, did not materialise in the turbulent period following the country's first democratic elections in 1994. The fundamental reason for this appears to be the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993), which favoured provincial autonomy for the development of provincial organisational structures, with the backing of the Public Service Commission (see the next chapter).

However, let this matter not be stymied by constitutional barriers alone. Clearly, the principle of co-operative governance did allow for national and provincial structures to agree jointly on issues of common concern, and structures such as HEDCOM and the CEM could have facilitated a stronger role for the national government in matters of provincial organisation. However, as I have pointed out above, this did not occur, owing in part to the need to continue the delivery of education administration services.

There is another plausible explanation for the non-implementation of the democratic movement's policy proposals on local education governance by the new government. This is what Jansen (2002a) refers to as 'policy symbolism'. Jansen argues that 'politicians do not always invent policy in order to change practice'; instead, 'it often represents a search for legitimacy' (Jansen, 2002a: 212). In the case of local education, the discourse of democracy and participation, and the imperative to legitimise the new government, appear to be drivers of policy making, rather than a serious intent to change education practice on the ground. Hence policy symbolism also partially explains the reluctance on the part of the new government to practically implement prevailing ideas on local education governance.

The discussion on why the new government did not adopt policy proposals on local education governance does not end here. It continues in the next chapter, which examines further explanations for the non-involvement of the centre in matters of local education, not only from the point of governance but also from that of administration.

Chapter 4

HOW PROVINCIAL GOVERNMENTS ASSIGN MEANING TO DISTRICTS

4.1 Introduction

This chapter explores further the reasons why there is no formal policy on the local level of the education system. It questions why, given the proclivity of the new government towards national unity, uniformity, centralisation and standardisation, the present education sub-system remains disparate and incongruent, particularly in terms of its form, organisation and design. While Chapter 3 concerned itself primarily with the imperatives of the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) and the (perceived) limits it placed on central government in determining a uniform system at the local level, this chapter focuses on the framework of the present Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (as adopted in 1996), and the subsequent legal position of districts in the system. Unlike Chapter 3, which focused on the transitional period from apartheid to democracy, this chapter centres on the post-1996 period. It responds to a key research question of this thesis, namely, *how do education stakeholders understand the meaning of education districts in the constitutional, policy and legislative contexts of post-apartheid South Africa?*

In addition, this chapter describes the present education sub-system with a view to demonstrating how provincial education departments have configured themselves in the absence of national policy on local education.[43] Thus, this chapter responds to a second research question of this study: *in what ways do provincial governments organise, structure and assign meaning to education districts given the policy vacuum around the specification of district design and organisation in South African education?* In particular, it examines the constitutional and legal arguments advanced by key education

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[43] I use the term 'local education' broadly to refer to the intermediate structures that lie between schools and provincial education departments.

role-players to explain why, even at present, there is no national policy on local-level education.

4.2 Implications of the South African Constitution for local education

An examination of the South African Constitution is crucial to this study, as it underpins many of the constitutional and legal arguments for and against national level intervention in local-level education. The Constitution of the Republic of South Africa (RSA, 1993, 1996b) is a product of long-standing and arduous negotiations between representatives of the apartheid political order and leaders of the liberation movements that had fought for decades against apartheid and colonialism. Hence it is not only a legal document, but one that mirrors the aspirations of the majority of South Africans. In line with the Constitution, the South African government has established a single national system of pre-tertiary education, which is largely managed by nine provincial education departments.

The Constitution (RSA, 1996b) provides for the establishment of two governance and management levels for the education system: the national level[44] which has powers and authority vested in the Minister and Head of the Department of Education, and the provincial level which has powers and authority vested in the Members of the Executive Council (MECs) and Heads of provincial education departments. In its distribution of functional areas between the different spheres of government (Schedules 4 and 5), the Constitution refrains from allocating any education functions to the local sphere of government, thereby nullifying earlier aspirations to link local-level education to local government.[45]

While the Constitution (RSA, 1996b) restricts education governance to the national and provincial spheres of government, education legislation does provide for a third tier of governance, namely that at the school level of the system. In terms of legislation, the

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[44] The use of the term 'level' is used with some circumspection here, as the Constitution refrains from using this term and instead consciously refers to the idea of national and provincial *spheres* of government.

[45] Pampallis (2002) asserts, though, that the Constitution does permit a provincial government to assign any of its legislative powers to a Municipal Council in the province (Section 104 (1) (c)). He observes that with respect to education, this possibility has never been given serious attention by any provincial government, nor have any serious suggestions to this effect been made by any significant constituency.

South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996c) provides only for *school-level* governance and management, where power and authority is vested in the principal and governing body of the school in terms of the functions listed in SASA.[46] Hence, neither the Constitution nor current education statutory frameworks direct how local-level education should be constituted.

Schedule 4 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996b) stipulates that 'education at all levels, excluding tertiary education,' is an area over which national and provincial governments have concurrent powers. (The national government has sole competence over tertiary education). This means that both national and provincial governments can legislate on any matter concerning pre-tertiary education. The idea of concurrent powers immediately raises questions about the possibility of conflict in legislation between the two spheres of government. Here Section 146 of the Constitution (RSA, 1996b) comes to the rescue. It states that where there is a conflict between national and provincial legislation, then national legislation will prevail over provincial legislation if the following conditions are met:

- o   if the national legislation deals with a matter that cannot be regulated effectively by provinces individually;
- o   if the national legislation deals with a matter that, to be dealt with effectively, requires uniformity across the nation. It provides such uniformity by establishing norms and standards, frameworks or national policies;
- o   if the national legislation is necessary for:
  - the maintenance of national security;
  - the maintenance of economic unity;
  - the protection of the common market in respect of the mobility of goods, services, capital and labour;
  - the promotion of economic activities across provincial boundaries;
  - the promotion of equal opportunity or equal access to government services; or
  - the protection of the environment.

In all other circumstances, provincial legislation prevails over conflicting national legislation.

In the context of this study, the Constitution does appear to provide space for the development of national policy, frameworks or norms and standards by national government for the provincial sub-system of education. This is conditional upon the national government considering *uniformity across the nation* as an effective mechanism

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[46] Section 17 of SASA does, however, provide for the governance of two or more schools to be vested in a single governing body if it is in the interests of education at the schools in question.

to deal with education delivery. Moreover, the Constitution permits the national sphere of government to exercise the right to legislate on matters or develop policy on issues that promote equal opportunity or equal access to government services. Indeed, the National Education Policy Act (NEPA) (RSA, 1996a) lists a wide range of functions for which the national Minister of Education could develop policy.

For the purposes of this thesis, Section 3 (4) (b) of NEPA (RSA, 1996a) is of particular relevance. It states that the Minister may determine national policy for 'the organisation, management and governance of the national education system'. If one interprets 'national education system' to mean the *whole* system of education, as Coombe (Interview, 2005) confirms, then it suggests that the Minister could choose to develop policy on provincial organisational, management and governance systems. Coombe (Interview, 2005) explains that the NEPA clause referred to above 'should be interpreted literally', but adds that any intervention by the Minister could not be imposed on provinces, but needed to occur in a consultative manner through structures such as HEDCOM and the CEM. To date, Ministers have decided not to follow this route, and have left it up to provinces to decide how they should structure and organise themselves.

The Constitution (RSA, 1996b), then, while silent on the role of local government in education, does seem to provide an opportunity for national government to intervene in matters related to local-level education on the grounds of uniformity, equal opportunity and equal access to government services. Moreover, the Constitution does not actively preclude national government from legislating, or developing policy, on any aspects of pre-tertiary education, including that of the education sub-system.

4.3 Districts on the agenda [47]

The preoccupation of the Department of Education and provincial education departments with the unification of racially divided education departments into non-racial provincial departments of education in the immediate post-1994 period (see Chapter 3) was translated several years later into increased attention to the arm of education service delivery closest to schools, namely, the local level of education. This was driven largely

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[47] This section is adapted from a DoE (2003) report, *Districts at a Glance*.

by the increasing emphasis placed on policy implementation (as opposed to policy development), and the crisis in functionality of provincial education departments in the 1998/1999 period. Rensburg (2000) observes that the 1998/1999 period reflected a shift in the priorities of government – from policy making to policy implementation. Indeed, as a DoE (2000:1) report observes, the major national conference on districts hosted by the Department in 1999 'came at a time when a shift to policy implementation aimed at school improvement became critical'. Prew (2003:52), too, points out that 'until 1999, there was a tendency among South Africa's key policy makers to sideline the district and discount its potential role in any change and delivery process'.

Boshoff (Interview, 2004), speaking in relation to the functional crisis in provinces, claims that 1997/1998 represented 'a period of the virtual collapse of provincial education departments'. The DoE policy on educator rationalisation and redeployment at the time contributed to this crisis. Boshoff (Interview, 2004) argues that the extraordinarily large number of vacancies created in districts as a result of the Voluntary Severance Packages (VSPs) offered by the government in that period resulted in much pressure on districts, leading to an inability of districts to deliver education services to schools. Meiring[48] adds that the complex processes involved in the staffing of provincial education departments as well as the retrenchment of the majority of senior and middle management personnel in the 1995/1996 period contributed to the apparent lack of managerial skills experienced by provinces in the early stages of their organisation. Moreover, provincial education departments were cash-strapped, and the deluge of policy mandates churned out by the Department since 1994 had weighed heavily on provinces. Whatever little capacity provinces had, was stretched to the limit.

Coombe (Interview, 2005) attributes the provincial fiscal crisis to the changes in the budgeting systems instituted by Treasury in 1997. He points out that 'it was only in 1997 that provinces assumed budgetary control in their own right', when provincial treasuries were tasked with allocating budgets to individual provincial departments. Prior to that, grants flowed directly from the national treasury to individual departments in the provinces. Coombe adds that 'all hell broke loose' in 1997, because very few provinces were able to handle their new fiscal responsibilities adequately.

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[48] E-mail comment received from Meiring on 10 August 2005 as part of the respondent validation process.

The establishment of the District Development Programme in 1998 (DoE, 2000), and its advocacy of the importance of districts, bears testimony to the increasing attention paid by the Department of Education to districts. As Chetty, the then Head of the DoE's District Development Programme, argued, districts are important 'because they are the closest departmental link to schools, and working with districts is more efficient than working with individual schools' (DoE, 2000:3). The role of the District Development Programme was, according to HEDCOM, to focus on 'providing capacity to district and circuit level officials to enable them to support the delivery of education at school level' (DoE, 1999a: Item 6.6 (a)).

An important enabling policy mechanism that facilitated the establishment of the District Development Programme was the introduction of the system of conditional grants. The notion of conditional grants was introduced in 1997/1998 as a method of steering policy and management by the centre. According to Coombe (Interview, 2005), 'conditional grants were a deliberate policy initiative, encouraged by Treasury, to concentrate on areas where quality had to improve'. The DoE believed that conditional grants should focus at the district level where it was felt that greater improvement would be made in schools, thus paving the way for a district-focused programme (Coombe, Interview, 2005).

The post-1997 period, therefore, provided a new context in which local-level education was being considered. The fiscal collapse of provinces, the absence of effective education service delivery, the availability of conditional grants as a tool to steer change, and the focus on policy implementation, in combination served to provide a milieu in which districts were accorded attention by the education system. The increased interest in districts by the national Department in the 1998/1999 period was therefore not driven solely by pedagogical considerations. Instead, it was driven primarily by the DoE's desire to ensure the implementation of new policies, and made possible through the system of conditional grants.

It is not surprising, then that, since 1999, restructuring and reorganisation have been prominent on the agenda of provincial education departments, resulting in constant changes to the ways in which provincial education sub-units are configured. In some provinces, functions and staff have moved from one geographic sub-unit to another, while in others, a geographic sub-unit has been removed completely from the provincial

education landscape.

The restructuring of provincial departments of education has been driven, in part, by the need for more efficient and effective education service delivery to schools. The attention paid to districts by the DoE in the 1998/1999 period through its District Development Programme, too, prompted provincial education departments to take a closer look at their organisational structures.

However, there was another compelling reason for provinces to restructure themselves. A signal from Cabinet that all provinces should demarcate their sub-structures in line with local government boundaries (Mali, Interview, 2004) directed many provincial education departments to re-examine the demarcations of their provincial sub-structures (see Chapter 5). Fleisch (2002a:187), writing from his experience of the GDE restructuring processes, notes that 'the new district boundaries were to be inextricably linked to and dependent on alignment with local government boundaries'. Moves to align education district boundaries with those of local government were not confined to the GDE alone. As a DoE report on districts points out, by 2003 restructuring initiatives of provincial education departments had resulted in the boundaries of their key sub-units corresponding very closely to those of local government (DoE, 2003a).

Tracking the new developments in provincial design has not been easy because provincial education departments have been in a constant state of organisational flux. As Fleisch (2002a:159) observes, 'from August 1997 to the middle of the year 2000, internal restructuring became an organisational obsession in the GDE'. By 2004, though, most provincial departments had reached some level of stability in their reorganisational processes. However, some provincial education departments, such as Eastern Cape and KwaZulu-Natal, are likely to soon undergo some adjustments to their organisational configurations,[49] while others, such as the GDE, are in the process of 'tweaking' their organograms to accommodate new changes.

A study undertaken by the Department of Education in 2003 found that provincial departments of education had sub-divided themselves into myriad different configurations

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[49] Telephonic conversation with Martin Prew, Director: Education Management and Governance Development.(EMGD) in the Department of Education.

(DoE, 2003a). Provincial departments of education are currently sub-divided into tiers[50] that vary in number from one to three (see Table 4.1).

Table 4.1   Number of geographical tiers within provincial education departments

One Tier	Two Tiers	Three Tiers
Eastern Cape (districts)	Limpopo (districts and circuits*51*)	KwaZulu-Natal (regions, districts and circuits)
Free State (districts)	Mpumalanga (regions and circuits)	
Gauteng (districts)	North West (regions and area project offices)	
Northern Cape (districts)		
Western Cape (EMDCs)		

Source: DoE (2003a)
EMDC = Education Management Development

Although Table 4.1 reflects a similar sub-provincial organisational design in five of the nine provincial education departments, the picture also reflects some diversity in the overall system. This is perhaps not surprising, given the contextual realities of provinces in terms of their respective histories, their different geographical landscapes, their access to resources, and most importantly, the absence of a national policy or framework on local education (see above and Chapter 3).

Provincial education departments are broadly organised in three different ways. Five education departments have a single tier between schools and the provincial head office, three provincial education departments have two tiers, and one provincial education department has established three intermediary layers between its schools and the provincial head office. In addition to provinces reflecting a variety of organisational configurations, they also reveal fairly substantial differences in nomenclature.

Table 4.2 below indicates that each tier of the provincial departments of education is made up of a number of sub-units that vary across provinces in terms of their nomenclature and size.

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[50] A 'tier' refers to the layer that exists between schools and the provincial head office.
[51] Circuits have been described as a separate tier only for those provinces where their organisational designs have formally established circuits as separate offices.

Table 4.2   Geographic sub-units of provincial departments of education

Province	Regions	Districts	Circuit offices
Eastern Cape	Nil	24	Formally, circuit offices do not comprise a separate tier of administration in the Eastern Cape education department. However, the Department has established several circuit offices, especially in rural areas, that are physically separate from district offices (but under the jurisdiction of districts).
Free State	Nil	5	The Free State education department has not established separate circuit offices.
Gauteng	Nil	12	There are no circuit offices in the GDE.
KwaZulu-Natal	4	12	**45 circuit offices** that are physically separated from districts. In KZN, a circuit office is made up of a number of wards. The term 'wards' is used to describe what is traditionally known as the circuit. KZN has a total of 189 wards.
Limpopo	Nil	6	**140 circuits** (Some circuit offices are physically separate from district offices, while others are in the same building as the district office.)
Mpumalanga	3	Nil	**57 circuit offices** that are physically separate from the regional offices.
Northern Cape	Nil	4	This department has not formally constituted circuit offices. However, in some districts it has established a few circuit offices that are separate from district offices.
North West	5	21 (APOs)	This Department has opted not to establish separate circuit offices.
Western Cape	Nil	7 (EMDCs)	There are no separate circuit offices in this department.
Total	**12**	**91**	

Source: DoE (2003a)
APO = Area Project Office; EMDC = Education Management Development Centre

There are 12 education regions, 91 districts and 242 formally established circuit offices in the South African education system. However, such aggregate figures need to be used with caution, particularly for national planning, policy implementation and policy analysis purposes, as the concepts of 'regions' and 'districts' hold different meanings across provinces in terms of the functions and powers they carry. For example, regions in Mpumalanga carry curriculum advisory functions, while the regions of the North West Education Department carry mainly administrative functions (DoE, 2003a). In

recognising the diversity that exists in the education sub-system, HEDCOM concluded that 'there is tension between the provinces on their approaches, models and district structures and processes, especially on how knowledge is mediated and how districts relate to institutions' (DoE, 1999c: Item B 3.1. (b) (ii) (ff.). Despite this diversity, and substantial differences in staffing levels, resources and programmes of provincial sub-structures across the country, there is a common stated purpose for provincial sub-units: to take education service delivery spatially closer to schools (DoE, 2000). Whether the existing structural designs of provincial education departments are successful in meeting this goal is a matter for further reflection and review.

Although the term district is used in six of the nine provincial education departments, it does not have the same meaning across the provinces in terms of the functions for which they are responsible. Some district offices carry both corporate (administration, financial and human resources) and professional (subject and management advisory) functions, while others carry only professional functions. In some instances, the professional functions are split between circuit offices and district offices (DoE, 2003a).

Currently, five different terms are used to describe provincial education sub-units: Region, District, Circuit, Area Project Office and Education Management Development Centre. This raises a number of questions, the key one being whether the use of the term districts that currently dominates South African education discourse is appropriate in the face of a diversely designed education sub-system. Can and should the term 'districts' be used in an all-encompassing way to refer to all of the geographic sub-units that exist in provincial departments of education (as is the case presently in most policy texts), or should a new discourse that reflects the diversity of provincial sub-structures and their nomenclature be created? One could assume that it is useful to maintain the term districts as an all-encompassing concept, as it is already in wide use in the South African education policy discourse. In addition, the concept serves as a 'meeting point' for accommodating diverse sub-provincial designs. Moreover, many countries the world over embrace districts as a local tier of their education systems, thus prodding South Africans to adopt a discourse that enables international dialogue (see Chapter 2).

An obvious danger, though, of adopting a single concept that accommodates a range of different models of sub-provincial designs is that it masks the complexity of South

African local education, and potentially undermines the implementation of national policy. As the Head of Department of the KwaZulu-Natal Department of Education remarked at a HEDCOM meeting held on 13 December 1999 (DoE, 1999c: Item B 3.1 (b) (v)), 'the discussion regarding districts has raised some concerns as it should be borne in mind that some provincial education departments also use a regional level of management'. The reduction of the variety of sub-provincial configurations to a single denominator, namely districts, therefore has the potential of confusing and distorting communication between national and provincial education systems. However, let not too hasty a conclusion about the diversity of the education sub-system be reached through interrogation of its structural and nomenclature-related dimensions only.

Notwithstanding the absence of a national directive on the nature of the education sub-system, provinces have created local education structures in South Africa that are strikingly similar, if not in their nomenclature, organisational design, size and shape, then certainly in their overall legal arrangement with provincial head offices. In all of the nine education departments, provincial sub-units are established as administrative units of the provincial head office. No sub-units have received original powers or authority in terms of provincial legislation, and none have been established as tiers of education governance in provinces. Hence local education structures exist largely as deconcentrated units of the provincial head office. Officials in these structures are directly responsible to their respective provincial departments of education, and not to any elected local constituency or political authority (Pampallis, 2002; DoE, 2003a). The nearest forms of local education governance are District Education and Training Councils that exist in some provinces, including Gauteng (Pampallis, 2002; Chapter 6 of this thesis). However, these exist largely as consultative bodies rather than as organs having any formal power or authority.

The deconcentrated nature of local education structures can be attributed largely to the legacy of the apartheid system, which had established regions and circuits as administrative units (rather than as autonomous or governance units) of the racially and ethnically defined education departments (see Chapter 3). In some ways the Constitution (RSA, 1993, 1996b), too, played a role in 'harmonising' the deconcentrated nature of provincial sub-units by foreclosing debate on a local tier of governance in education (see Chapter 3). Mphahlele (Interview, 2004) credits the Department's 1999 District Development Programme for nudging provinces towards some form of uniformity in the

education sub-system. He observes, for example, that the Northern Cape Education Department changed its nomenclature from regions to districts, while Limpopo adopted the idea of districts in its 1999 restructuring exercise. National dialogue, then, did serve some purpose in unifying what could have been an even more widely disparate form of local education.

In addition to local education structures across the nine provinces reflecting a common form of decentralisation (namely deconcentration), the core functions of provincial education sub-structures are also quite similar (DoE, 2000, 2003). For example, the EMDCs of Western Cape and the Area Project Offices of North West carry functions that are similar to those of districts in Gauteng and Northern Cape (DoE, 2003a). In addition, districts and circuit offices (or wards) in KwaZulu-Natal, placed together, also serve a similar function to districts in Northern Cape and Gauteng.

Hence while local education structures are diverse with respect to their design, nomenclature, size and shape, they do reflect common features such as their existence as administrative (as opposed to governance) units of provincial education departments. Moreover, the aggregated functions of the different units in each of the provinces reflect common features.

While the diversity in provincial organisational design is welcome on the presumption that it reflects contextual realities, and the assumption that a contextually driven structure would be more responsive to local realities, the absence of a uniform local system of education raises a number of questions. Should such a uniform system exist in the first instance? To what end? Does the diversity in local education structures undermine equity of education service delivery in any way? Can a semblance of uniformity be attained for national deliberations on districts to take place in a coherent manner? Does a divergent local system of education imply that a uniform system of education in South Africa is non-existent? These questions are explored further below.

The quest for uniformity in a diverse system is overlaid with the search for attaining the goals of equity and quality in education, and poses dilemmas about whether unity of organisation is a prerequisite for unity of purpose. Perhaps disparities in nomenclature, diversity in design or variations in how functions are distributed vertically between

provincial sub-structures do not necessarily imply that the South African local education system is fundamentally fragmented and disjointed. It is conceivable that the unity of *purpose* of sub-provincial structures (namely, to provide education services closer to schools) could override the effects of variations in organisational design within local education.

4.4 The quest for a national policy on districts – abandoned?

At a major conference on districts hosted by the Department of Education in 1999, Godden and Maurice (DoE, 2000) called for stronger intervention by the DoE on districts. In visualising prospects for the future, they proposed a national agenda for districts that would clarify the legal framework, roles, functions, power and authority of districts. They suggested that the Department do this through the development of legislation, policy frameworks and the establishment of norms and standards on districts (Godden & Maurice, 2000:28).[52] As recently as 2004, renewed calls for a local district governance structure have emerged from the *Ministerial Committee on School Governance* (DoE, 2004:171). The Committee proposed the establishment of a local governance structure composed of a wide range of stakeholders,[53] tasked to deal with all issues of governance affecting learners, parents and educators in the area. To date, the DoE appears to have been reluctant to take this route, although internal exploratory discussions on this matter have taken place.[54] This part of the thesis probes deeper into the reasons why the quest for greater central intervention on the roles, powers and functions of districts (as advocated by the District Development Conference in 1999) was not pursued further by the Department of Education.

In the period following the 1994 elections, a number of factors appeared to have constrained the hand of the Department of Education (the Interim Constitution being one)

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[52] Godden and Maurice (DoE, 2000:28) proposed that the national agenda should, through legislation, clarify and establish the legal framework and authority of district offices.

[53] The Ministerial *Report on the Review of School Governance* provides a detailed proposal on the composition, functions, powers and duties of the local governance structure. It proposes that the local governance structure be composed of school principals, union representatives, circuit office, district office, SGB associations, local councillors, business representatives, traditional healers, South African Police Services, Department of Health, Public Works, learner organisations, etc., and be convened by the circuit official (DoE, 2004).

[54] During the period of my secondment to the DoE, there an was initiative to examine the establishment of norms and standards (and possibly policy) for districts.

in intervening in provincial matters (see Chapter 3). However, despite the promulgation of NEPA in 1996, which permits the DoE to develop policy on matters of provincial organisation (see earlier discussion in this chapter), many stakeholders interviewed in this study believe that it is still inappropriate for the DoE to direct the form and nature of local education.

The arguments against national intervention in the form of policy, legislation or frameworks for local-level education are rooted in either practical or legal paradigms. Speaking from a practical perspective, Prinsloo (Interview, 2004), an education law expert,[55] charges that

> it is crazy to use the same structure for all provinces – we need different kinds of sub-divisions for different provinces because of their geography. The DoE cannot provide one model. For example, the North West has a large number of farm schools, and would require different kinds of arrangements from other provinces.

In commenting on the reasons why provinces did not duplicate their sub-provincial designs, Boshoff (Interview, 2004) makes the following argument:

> Provinces did not "copy" each other with a winning recipe because of disparities in their budgets and infrastructures. For example, the Free State had a massive number of small schools, and the cost of running small schools is much higher than that of running bigger schools. In advantaged provinces there are bigger schools and support systems for bigger schools are easier to deal with. Also, the Northern Cape has small schools linked by big distances resulting in a higher cost of delivery. At that time the budget was based on the number of learners.

In sum, the practical arguments against a trend towards uniformity of provincial sub-systems suggest that it is not feasible for the South African education system to constitute identical local structures for all provinces. These are based on the conviction that the dynamics in provinces are too divergent to allow for the imposition of a single model from the centre. More specifically, factors such as the wide differences in provincial budgets and priorities, dissimilar geographical conditions of provinces and differences in the types of schools (big, small, urban, rural) that are dominant in provinces, do not lend themselves to a single model of local education.

However, while these arguments are valid, it is not uncommon to find single local models of education systems in countries that experience similar diverse conditions. Many countries such as Namibia, Canada, India, the UK, Scotland and the USA have

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[55] Mr Justice Prinsloo is a legal advisor to the Suid Afrikaanse Onderwysers Unie.

established single local education systems (Coombe & Godden, 1996). Hence explanations other than practical contexts are essential to explain the absence of a uniform local education system in South Africa.

Speaking from a legal standpoint, Professor Malherbe[56] (Interview, 2004) was very clear that, in terms of the Constitution (RSA, 1996b) it is the prerogative of provincial departments to decide upon their own sub-divisions. This view is supported by senior officials of the Department of Education who claim that the current constitutional arrangements of the country prevent the DoE from intervening in provincial arrangements (Interview, Boshoff, 2004). The former Director-General of Education, Thami Mseleku, is also of the opinion that the DoE cannot legislate on the authority of districts – because they are not a governance entity.[57] He adds that districts reflect an arrangement of provincial management and that the DoE cannot legislate for management. He argues further that

> structures cannot be legislated unless there is original authority. How the provincial HOD organises to fulfil his/her authority is not for the DoE. Districts are currently management instruments, not governance instruments.

In response to the question about the legal space available for the DoE to develop norms and standards for districts that could facilitate greater equity in the system, Boshoff (interview, 2004) contends that

> the district is not an entity on its own. It does not have original authority and an original budget. Therefore, the DoE cannot norm what districts must do.

Boshoff adds that if we want a uniform system we will have to amend the Constitution to make education an exclusive national competence. This would imply that there would be a single management structure for a single education department. Boshoff (Interview: 2004) also believes that

> there is no need to look at governance structures for districts because their functions are administrative and professional – and therefore the responsibility of provinces.

There is also concern that if districts were established as discrete legal entities, it would lead to further fragmentation of the education system, as districts could become 'independent' and the delivery of education would not be able to be controlled (Interview, Boshoff, 2004).

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[56] Professor Malherbe is a legal expert on education, based at the Rand Afrikaans University.
[57] At a meeting held on 10 October 2004.

The legal arguments advanced by stakeholders against national intervention in provincial organisation are fairly complex. It is perhaps easier to separate them into aspects based on governance issues and those based on an administrative perspective. The 'governance argument' against national intervention by the Department of Education is based on the reality that because districts do not represent a separate level of governance in the education system, the law prevents it from developing policy or legislation about them. In a way, this is a circular argument because mechanisms do exist for the Minister to establish legislation that can create an intermediary layer of governance in the system. Such mechanisms could include:

- ❑ A bottom-up approach that allows for school governing bodies of individual schools to coalesce at the district level of the system, and form a district layer of governance. Existing legislation could be amended to make this a possibility.[58]
- ❑ A 'top-down' approach involving the application of Section 17 of the South African Schools Act (RSA, 1996c), which provides for the MEC to determine that the governance of two or more public schools could vest in a single governing body.
- ❑ The establishment of a discrete intermediate layer of local governance through new legislation (as suggested by the *Report of the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance* (DOE, 2004:171).
- ❑ The convergence of local education governance with local government, which allows for local government to play a role in education governance.

The point made in this instance is that legal mechanisms *do* exist for the introduction of a local level of governance in the system. However, to date the various Ministers of Education have been reluctant to draw on their legal powers to do so.

To return to the administrative aspect of the legal arguments forwarded by stakeholders regarding reasons for the lack of DoE intervention in provincial organisation. This matter seems to be one of legal interpretation as it appears to be surrounded by conflicting legislation. On the one hand, as pointed out earlier in this chapter, Section 3 (4) (b) of

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[58] Patel (presently a senior official in the DoE), at a GDE District Development conference held in October 2002, proposed the idea of establishing autonomous districts through national or provincial legislation. Such legislation would allow each district to have its own district governing body, elected either by existing school governing body members, or by pupils and parents from schools within in the chapter (Pampallis, 2002:13).

NEPA (RSA, 1996a) permits the Minister of Education to determine policy on matters related to the organisation, management and governance of the national education system. On the other hand, Part III Section B. 2 (a) of the Public Service Regulations (DPSA, 2001) directs MECs to determine their own organisational structure. It stipulates that 'based on the strategic plan of the Department, an executing authority shall determine the department's organisational structure in terms of its core and support functions'. In addition, Part III Section A of the Public Service Regulations (DPSA, 2001) notes that 'within available funds, she or he shall, based on the department's and Government's service delivery objectives and mandates, plan to execute functions with an efficient and effective internal organisation'. Hence the Public Service Regulations direct responsibility for provincial organisation to provincial departments.

On closer reading of NEPA (RSA, 1996a) and the Public Service Regulations (DPSA, 2001), though, one finds that these two pieces of legislation do not necessarily contradict one another. While the Public Service Regulations do make provinces *responsible* for the organisation of their respective departments, they do not preclude national government from developing frameworks or norms and standards, which provincial governments can draw upon for the establishment of provincial structures and sub-structures. In fact, in the case of education, the Minister of Education can draw on existing legislation (such as NEPA) to develop policy on the organisation, management and governance of the provincial education system (see earlier reference to NEPA). However, as mentioned earlier, Ministers of Education have thus far refrained from doing so. Instead key education role-players (as quoted earlier) have used legal arguments to justify the lack of national intervention in matters of provincial organisation.

It is perhaps constructive, therefore, to turn to other national government departments to examine how they, within a similar Constitutional framework – that is, those having concurrent powers with their provincial counterparts in terms of Schedule 4 Part A of the Constitution–have considered the local system of service delivery. In this instance, the district health system established by the Department of Health (DoH) is worthy of exploration.

The Department of Health places its district-level health system at the centre of its entire health strategy, rather than the national or provincial levels of health care (DoH, 1997).

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Its first White Paper, the *Transformation of the Health System in South Africa* (DoH, 1997), advocates the establishment of a single national health system, based on a district health system that would facilitate the promotion of health services in communities. However, the White Paper does not specify how the district health system should be governed or organised. Instead Section 2.3.1 (b) of the White Paper (DoH: 1997) considers three possible governance options for its proposed district health system:

❑ the provincial option – where provinces would be responsible for all district health services through a district manager;

❑ the statutory district health authority option - where the province, through legislation, creates a district health authority for each health district; or

❑ the local government option – where the local authority would be responsible for all district health services.

These three options strike a familiar chord with education. They reflect similar debates that have occurred in education since the 1990s. Education, too, considered options for local government involvement in local education, and possibilities for a distinct local tier of education governance (ANC, 1993; NEPI, 1992). However, after 1994 it settled for what the Department of Health White Paper describes as the provincial option, where provinces are responsible for local service delivery. What is interesting about the approach adopted by the Department of Health, particularly in the context of the legal issues confronting the debate on local education, is that the post-1994 Department of Health was not reticent about its authority on local service delivery. Unlike the case of education, it did not allow itself to be bogged down by Constitutional and legal provisos. In adopting a district health system as the core of its health strategy, it forged ahead with explorations of how this could be made possible through the examination of various governance options.

The Department of Education, however, did not thrust local education forward as the centre of its service delivery strategy; hence it paid little attention to districts. In fact, the first White Paper on Education and Training (DoE, 1995a), makes little reference to the local level of the education system. This is not to argue that it should have, as there is little basis in this study to claim that a locally driven education service delivery system would have reaped higher quality education in schools. My contention in this instance is

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that the legal arguments advanced by the Department of Education in justifying non-interference in local-level education are not entirely valid, as has been demonstrated by the Health sector.

More recently, the Health Ministry promulgated the National Health Act (RSA, 2003), which establishes a district health system that is closely aligned with that of local government. Section 29 (2) of the Act stipulates that the boundaries of health districts be co-terminous with local government boundaries. Hence the governance of the district health system, through district health councils, is the responsibility of both provincial government the relevant local government authorities. The National Health Act (RSA, 2003) invokes Section 156 (4) of the Constitution to facilitate the assignment of functions from provincial health departments to the local sphere of government.

Perhaps I should reiterate that I am not suggesting that Education follow a similar route to that of Health. My point in this instance, that it does not appear to be legally impossible for Education to establish a uniform system of local education should it believe that it has pedagogical advantages and could advance the cause of quality education. Whether or not local education should form the core of an education service delivery strategy is explored in Chapter 8. This chapter merely seeks an explanation as to why there is no single, uniform education sub-system in South Africa.

The practical and legal arguments advanced by key education role-players (see above) to justify the reluctance of the Department of Education to develop a single education sub-system are not entirely convincing. What then are other explanations for the lack of willingness on the part of the Department to give serious consideration to the local level of education? This question is explored below.

4.5 Conclusion

This chapter has revealed two contrasting, but co-existing, features of South African local education. Firstly, South Africa does not have a single, uniform, homogeneous system of local education; instead local education is characterised by major variations in organisational design, size, form, shape and nomenclature. Secondly, South African local education structures simultaneously displays several common traits that do provide a

semblance of coherence. In this vein, there is a stated unity of purpose of local education structures, namely that education services be taken closer to schools (DoE, 2000), and local education structures are all constituted within a similar decentralisation framework, namely, as deconcentrated units of provincial Head offices. Hence local education structures in South Africa can be characterised as being inconsistent in terms of their design, structures and nomenclature, but coherent with respect to the purpose they supposedly serve, and identical with respect to their deconcentrated status within provincial education departments.

It is fairly obvious that the absence of a national policy on the education sub-system, and the non-interventionist stance adopted by the Department of Education and by Ministers of Education regarding provincial organisation has resulted in the absence of a uniform local education system in South Africa. Simultaneously, however, the inheritance of deconcentrated administrative units from the apartheid education system has led to the continued existence of similar local education formations in the post-apartheid period.

This study questions why the system has, to date, resisted developing policy on the local level of education, particularly given its penchant for policy making over the last decade. Perhaps part of the answer lies in posing the question in another way: what are the forces that drive governments to arrive at certain policy decisions? Psacharopoulos (1990:1) asserts that educational policy is often enacted to serve a particular purpose, 'be it pedagogical, political, economic or other good causes'. Certainly ideology does not appear to be 'a good cause' in this instance, as the ANC policy framework on education (ANC, 1994), the policy proposals by NEPI (1992), the Hunter Report (1995) and the more recent *Report of the Ministerial Review Committee on School Governance* (DoE, 2004) all reflect a similar desire for a discrete level of local governance in education. What, then, have been the drivers of policy making in the Department of Education?

Coombe, at a seminar held at the University of the Witwatersrand on 16 July 2004, elucidated that national education policy is generally driven by a number of considerations, including constitutional imperatives, presidential and Cabinet directives, general government policy, court decisions, national Treasury frameworks, reports of Ministerial Commissions and pressure from lobbyists, stakeholders and the public in general. In this instance, constitutional imperatives certainly did impact on national-level

thinking about local education. Chapter 3 revealed that in the transitional period, the Interim Constitution (RSA, 1993) played a central role in influencing national thinking on local education by directing provinces, instead of the national government through the PSC, to establish provincial organisations, and by compelling government to focus on *school*-level governance, rather than *local*-level governance.

Pampallis (2002), however, advances a political argument as to why there is little incentive for the national government, and indeed provincial governments, to explore the possibility of introducing a level of district governance in the education system. He argues that there is little inducement on the part of governments to do so simply because there is no strong local constituency advocating it. Since 1994, there has been little lobbying from local communities for greater power at the local level of the education system. Hence a plausible explanation for the apathy displayed by the Department of Education in engaging with local-level education governance lies in the absence of political pressure from 'the ground', so to speak.

Unlike the case of school governance, where political temperatures regarding school autonomy were and continue to be very high, there is no political impulse driving government towards policy making for local-level education. This is not to suggest that there has been no interest on the part of government, and the DoE in particular, in local education. Certainly, in 1998, the Department directed resources (through the system of conditional grants) towards the establishment of a District Development Programme, which was aimed at promoting the effectiveness of provincial sub-structures. However, this interest was, in the main, inspired by the need to ensure the implementation of national policy, rather than address the direct pedagogical concerns of schools, or a desire to thrust local education to the centre of education service delivery.

One could attribute other reasons to the relative indifference by the DoE to local education. Firstly, as has been demonstrated in Chapter 3, South Africa has no history of a strong system of local education management and/or governance; hence the post-apartheid government did not inherent a vibrant system of local education on which it could build new approaches to education service delivery. (This is in contrast to the Health sector, where municipalities were traditionally involved in the provision of local health services). Secondly, the post-1994 government was preoccupied with the

provincialisation of education, and the amalgamation of the 19 racially and ethnically divided departments of the apartheid education system. Local-level education did not occupy the centre stage of its strategic framework, as it was presumably less complex to prioritise transformation of the national and provincial levels of the system. And thirdly, the importance attached to *school-level* governance as a consequence of the political negotiations at CODESA, compelled the government to concentrate on institutional governance, rather than local governance. Hence the path of education decentralisation in South Africa followed individual schools, rather than local communities. Buckland and Hofmeyr (1992:41) point out that trends in the decentralisation literature suggest that there are often tensions about whether the unit of local control should be at the school level or with the local community. South African education did not have the luxury of debating where in the lower levels of its system control should be located, as political considerations and constitutional imperatives predetermined and framed the centrality of school self-governance, as opposed to local-level governance.

The reasons for the absence of a policy on districts are multiple and complex. Political, constitutional and historical forces woven together in a strong web scuttled any aspirations for a homogeneous and uniform level of local education. However, as was mentioned earlier, South African local education, while incoherent with respect to its organisation, design and nomenclature, is consistent in terms of its purpose and the decentralised space it occupies in the education system. The next three chapters examine the details of this space and the roles and functions of the structures that occupy it, through a case study of the Tshwane South District in Gauteng.

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).

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[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* Principles[60] 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

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[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) Unit[62] 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

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[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

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[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

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[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). Mali[67] (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

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[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 it 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, Chanee[69] (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.

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[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

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[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

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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

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[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); Intersen[72] (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

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[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, IDS 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

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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

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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

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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.

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[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, Malopane[74] 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 Vereninging (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

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[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

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accountable.

An additional feature of the district accountability system is that it is 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

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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

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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

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> 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 IDSO[77] 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

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[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 IDS. 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

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[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

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

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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, teachers[82] 6,

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[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 inspectoral 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

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> 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

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[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

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(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 limits 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 office[84]

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

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[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]

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[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

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[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

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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

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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.

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6.4 CDS activity – a view from the district office[88]

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.

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[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 office[89]

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.

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[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

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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 office[90]

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

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[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, andsorting 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 Unit[91]

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

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[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 supportive 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

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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

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[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'etre* 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

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[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.

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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

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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' that 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

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> 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

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[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 manger 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

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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

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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 (Interveiw, 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 official[95] 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

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[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 liase 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

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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

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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

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[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

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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).

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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

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[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

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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

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[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

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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 meditated 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.

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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).

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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

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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

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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

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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.

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APPENDICES

Appendix 1: List of respondents

A1.1 Individual and focus group interviews conducted for the study

No	Date	Name of Person or Group	Organisation/post
1.	27 January 2004	Eben Boshoff	DoE: Legal Services Department
2.	28 January 2004	Leps Mphahlele	DoE: Former DDP staff member
3.	24 February 2005	Trevor Coombe	DoE: Former Deputy Director-General
4.	15 March 2005	Dirk Meiring	DoE: Former Deputy Director-General
5.	15 April 2005	Chabani Manganyi	DoE: Former Director-General
6.	2 March 2004	Thulas Nxesi	National General Secretary: SADTU
7.	16 February 2004	Sue Muller	Director: NAPTOSA
8.	22 January 2004	Professor Hugh Davies	Chief Executive Officer: SAOU
9.	11 February 2004	Kathy Callaghan	National Secretary: FEDSAS
10.	29 January 2004	Vusi Zwane	Provincial Secretary: NASGB
11.	8 September 2004	Professor Malherbe	Legal expert (Professor of Law:RAU)
12.	2 September 2004	Justice Prinsloo	Legal expert (Legal advisor: SAOU)
13.	10 March 2004	Jan Niewenhous	University of Pretoria
14.	28 September 2004	Thami Mali	GDE – Chief Director: Districts
15.	27 September 2004	Reena Rampersad	GDE – Chief Director: Curriculum Professional Development and Support
16.	27 July 2004	Albert Chanee	GDE – Acting Divisional Manager: OFSTED
17.	21 July 2004	Prosperitus High School	Teacher
18.	21 July 2004	Prosperitus High School	Principal
19.	11 June 2004	Joupie Fourie Primary	Teacher
20.	11 June 2004	Joupie Fourie Primary	Principal
21.	8 June 2004	Flavius Mareka Secondary	Teacher
22.	8 June 2004	Flavius Mareka Secondary	Principal
23.	17 June 2004	Norridge Park Primary	Teacher
24.	17 June 2004	Norridge Park primary	Principal
25.	14 June 2004	Jacaranda Primary	Principal
26.	15 June 2004	Makgatho Primary School	Teacher
27.	15 June 2004	Makgatho Primary School	Principal
28.	3 August 2004	Gatang Secondary School	Teacher
29.	7 June 2004	Laudium Secondary School	Principal

30.	9 June 2004	Voortrekker Hoer Skool	Principal
31.	18 June 2004	Bohlabasatsi Primary School	Teacher
32.	18 June 2004	Bohlabasatsi Primary School	Principal
33.	10 June 2004	Group Interview (Two teachers)	Laudium Secondary and Voortrekkerhoogte Hoerskool
34.	5 February	Jane Murray	District: CDS Coordinator
35.	13 August 2004	Tim Mafokane (1)	District Director
36.	30 September 2004	Tme Mafokane (2)	District Director
37.	29 June 2004	Seth Hlatshwayo (1)	District: IDS Coordinator
38.	30 August 2004	Seth Hlatshwayo (2)	District: IDS Coordinator
39.	14 July 2004	Reuben Baloyi	District: Administration
40.	2 June 2004	ESS Focus Group	District: ESS Unit
41.	10 Sept 2004	IDS Focus Group (1)	District: IDS officials
42.	10 Sept 2004	IDS Focus Group (2)	District: IDS officials
43.	10 Sept 2004	IDS Focus Group (3)	District: IDS officials
44.	20 May 2004	CDS Focus Group	District: CDS officials
45.	1 July 2004	Avril Barker	District: Examinations Unit
46.	16 July 2004	Jane Murray and Gerda Odendaal	District: CDS coordinators (one person in acting post)
47.	10 August 2005	Rebecca Malopane Andre Korkie	Assistant Director: Policy and Planning DCES: Policy and Planning

A1.2 Non-participant observer at meetings, discussions and school visits

No	Date	Nature of interaction observed	Persons involved	Additional notes
1	6 September 04	Non-participant observer at a meeting of IDS officials	IDS officials	12 IDS officials were present
2	2 February 05	Non-participant observer of a school visit undertaken by a district support team. The school visit was directed at the Foundation Phase of the school	4 CDS officials and 2 members from ESS from the district office. Interaction took place with the school principal and Foundation phase teachers.	Visit to Pfundo NdiTshedza Primary School, Mamelodi.
3	22 February 05	Non-participant observer of school visits undertaken by an IDSO	Paula Galigo (IDSO) and Principals of schools (in one school, 3 other staff members were also present)	Visits to Garsfontein Hoerskool, Garsfontein Laerskool and Lynwood Laerskool

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A1.3 Telephonic interviews

NO	DATE	NAME OF PERSON	ORGANISATION/POST
	3 August 2005	Gerda Odendaal	CDS Coordinator (GET)
	4 August 2005	Daya Govender	CEO: Education Labour Relations Council

Appendix 2: Interview schedules

A2.1 Overview of research activities undertaken over the period of the study

Research activities	Estimated time frames
Finalisation of the research proposal	November 2003
Negotiating access to schools and the district office	November 2003 – January 2004
Document analysis (RSA Constitution, national policy and legal documents, national reports)	January – February 2004
Preparation of interview schedules for national stakeholders; Interviews with national stakeholders	February – March 2004
Document analysis (provincial policies, provincial and national legislation, strategic and operational plans, organograms, annual reports)	March 2004 – April 2005
Preparation of interview schedules (district and provincial stakeholders); Interviews with provincial-level stakeholders; First wave of district-level data collection (interviews, on-site observation)	April – May 2004
Preliminary data analysis (1st round)	May – June 2004
Preparation of school-level research instruments; Focus-group interviews with teachers and principals	May - August 2004
Second wave of district-level research (interviews, on-site observation, school visits)	August - November 2004
Preliminary Data Analysis (2nd round)	November 2004
Outstanding interviews	January – April 2005
Main data analysis	March 2005
Interpretation of research findings	April 2005
Completion of first draft	July 2005
Finalisation of research report	September 2005

A2.2 List of interview schedules

Number	Interviewees
1(A)	National Stakeholders
1 (B)	National stakeholders (DoE)
2	Provincial officials
3 (A)	District Director (!st wave)
3 (B)	District Director (2nd wave)
4	Legal experts
5 (A)	IDS and CDS officials (1st wave)
5 (B)	IDS and CDS officials (2nd wave)
6	Principals
7	Teachers
8	Examinations official
9	District Deputy Director

A2.3 Interview protocol number 1(a): national stakeholders[99]

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain the meanings that national education stakeholders ascribe to the concept of education 'districts' in South Africa. It seeks to do so by probing stakeholder understandings of the rationale for the establishment of local education structures and the role of 'districts' in the education system. In addition, the interviews probe for explanations on the common and contested meanings of education 'districts' by tracing the historical and political roots for the establishment of education provincial sub-structures since 1994.

Deleted:

1. During the education restructuring processes in 1994, provincial departments of education established geographical sub-units such as regions, districts and circuits as part of their organisational system. Why do you think it was necessary for provincial departments of education to create such sub-structures?

   Probes:
   - ❑ Improve efficiency and effectiveness
   - ❑ Constitution (interim and current)
   - ❑ Legacy (cultural, structural)
   - ❑ Political accommodation

2. Who was involved in the processes of amalgamating the former racial education departments together into single provincial departments of education in 1994? What were the roles of the different parties in establishing these unified provincial departments of education?

   Probes:
   - ❑ Public Service Commission
   - ❑ National Department of Education
   - ❑ Political parties
   - ❑ Old guard/new guard

3. What was the nature of the debate (in the 1994 period) regarding the establishment of provincial sub-structures?

   Probes:
   - ❑ Powers/roles/functions/administrative mechanisms to transfer functions, power,

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[99] National stakeholders include the following: Teacher unions and national school governing body structures.

authority

- ❑ Local governance
- ❑ Links to local government

4. The current sub-systems of the provincial departments of education vary considerably across the different provincial departments. For example, some provinces have three administrative tiers (KZN), whilst others have only one tier of administration between schools and provincial head offices (Gauteng, Northern Cape). Why do you think this variation in sub-substructures exist?

Probes:

- ❑ Contextual differences in provinces (eg. size of province)
- ❑ Legacy
- ❑ Political interests; interests of individuals
- ❑ Education interests

5. Should there be uniformity in the form and design of local education, or are there adequate grounds for retaining variation in sub-provincial design? Why do you think so?

Probes:

- ❑ National unity
- ❑ Equity in service delivery
- ❑ Equity in service conditions of district officials

6. The term 'districts' is used in a number of national education policy documents (eg. WSE, White Papers 5 and 6). Yet 'districts' do not exist in certain provincial departments of education (eg. North-West Province and Mpumalanga), while in other provinces, districts co-exist with other structures such as regions and circuits. How then can one interpret the meaning of 'districts' as used presently in DoE policy texts?

Probes:

- ❑ Districts – a conceptual term?
- ❑ Replace term with 'provincial sub-units'
- ❑ A problem of national 'incompetence', and hence a problem for the national

7. What do you see as the core functions of education 'districts'? That is, what are 'districts' for?

Probes:

- ❑ District identity (management unit, administrative unit, support centre..?)

- Support vs accountability
- Facilitation, passive mediation
- Powers/functions/authority

8. The Departments of Education, have in the recent past, been promoting the idea of strengthening links between education and local government. What are your views on this matter?

   Probes
   - What should be the nature of these links ('common borders')
   - Movement of some functions to local government

Summary

The data obtained from the interview will be recorded with the aid of a tape-recorder, and transcribed into text. The text of the data will be submitted to interviewees for verification.

The data will be analysed against existing conceptions of decentralisation, and in the context of the absence of official policy on education 'districts'. In addition, the data will be analysed to derive explanations for why 'districts' took the shape and form they did in post-apartheid South Africa.

A2.4 Interview protocol number 1(b): national stakeholders[100]

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain deeper insight into the historical trajectory of district development. In particular, it attempts to understand why the DoE did not pursue the option of a local tier of education governance in the post-1994 period. It also seeks to understand why provincial education departments aligned their district boundaries to those of local government in the period after 1999.

1. The ANC and NECC had floated the idea of a separate layer of local governance between schools and provinces in their pre-1994 policy proposals on Education. The DoE did not take up this idea after 1994. What do you think are the reasons for this?

2. Did the DoE at any time place the matter of local level education on its own agenda, or that of HEDCOM and CEM, in any significant way? Please explain.

3. NEPA (Section (3) (4) (b)) suggests that the Minister may determine national policy for the organisation, management and governance of the national education system. How do you interpret this clause of NEPA? Does it imply that the Minister could develop policy for the organisation, management and governance of provincial systems?

4. In 1999, all provincial education departments initiated processes to re-organise themselves to align their sub-structures to local government boundaries. Was this in response to any particular directive from higher level authorities?

5. What has been your experience of the regions/circuits that existed in education departments of the apartheid era, particularly in terms of their relationship to schools and Head offices?

6. The term 'district' is used commonly today to refer to the local level of the education system. How do you think this came about?

Summary

The data obtained from the interview will be recorded with the aid of a tape-recorder, and transcribed into text. The text of the data will be submitted to interviewees for verification.

The data will be analysed against existing conceptions of decentralisation, and in the context of the absence of stated national policy on education 'districts'. In addition, the data will be analysed to derive explanations for why 'districts' took the shape and form they did in post-apartheid South Africa.

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[100] National stakeholders include the following: Current and former staff of the DoE.

A2.5 Interview protocol number 2: provincial-level officials of the Gauteng Department of Education

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain the perceptions, insights and views of provincial level education officials about the rationale for and role of education districts in the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). It seeks to do so by probing officials' understandings of the current organisation of districts as well as their vision for GDE districts. In addition, the interview searches for explanations on the common and contested meanings of GDE districts by tracing historically, how the current form of districts in the GDE came into being.

1. During the education restructuring processes in 1994, the GDE established regions and districts as part of its organisational system. Why do you think it was necessary for the GDE to create such sub-structures?

Rationale for decentralisation – comparison with international perspectives.

Probes:
- Improve efficiency and effectiveness
- Constitution (interim and current)
- Legacy (cultural, structural)
- Political accommodation

2. Who was involved in the processes of amalgamating the former racial education departments together into a single education department in 1994? What were the roles of the different parties in establishing these unified provincial departments of education?

Political explanation for why decentralisation took the form it did.

Probes:
- Public Service Commission
- National Department of Education
- Political parties
- Old guard/new guard

3   What was the nature of the debate (in the 1994 period), regarding the establishment of regions and districts in the GDE?

Explanation for why different meanings of education districts exist.

Probes:

❑ Powers/roles/functions/administrative mechanisms to transfer functions, power, authority

❑ Local governance

❑ Links to local government

4.   After the 1994/1995 restructuring period, the GDE underwent further restructuring processes. Regions were done away with, and to date the GDE has a single tier of administration between schools and the provincial head office. In addition, a further restructuring process shifted some functions to the Gauteng Shared Services Centre. Why did the GDE undergo its second and third round of restructuring?

Rationale for decentralisation. Explanation for why different meanings of education districts exist.

Probes:
❑ Efficiency
❑ Effectiveness
❑ Individual interests
❑ Ideology

5.   Have the new structures delivered on what was expected of them? If not, why not?

Rationale and effects of decentralisation. What problem is addressed by decentralisation. Explanation for why different meanings of education districts exist.

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6.   It appears that the GDE does not have a stated policy or any legislation that outlines the rationale for the establishment of districts, or that proclaims a vision for districts. Why has the GDE not deemed it necessary to develop such a policy or enact legislation that outlines what it expects of districts?

Reasons for absence of policy. Legal status of districts.

Probes:
❑ No national policy
❑ Viewed as administrative action
❑ Lack of capacity
❑ Staff turnover

    ❑ Organogram serves purpose

7.   What do you see as the core purpose of districts? That is, what are districts for?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – purpose of districts.

Probes:
- ❑ Support vs accountability
- ❑ Drive policy/ensure policy compliance
- ❑ Promote school change
- ❑ Facilitation, passive mediation
- ❑ District identity (management unit, administrative unit, support centre..?)

8.   What do you see as the key functions of districts, as opposed to that of the head office of the GDE? To what extent do district functions correspond to what districts actually do?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – functions of districts. Discrepancy analysis.

Probes:
- ❑ Compare with official text
- ❑ Why does discrepancy exist

9.   There has been some discussion within the GDE about the powers and authority of districts. What has been the nature of this debate? Where has the debate originated from – from the districts themselves, or from provincial level officials? Do districts, in your view, have too much or too little power?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – powers and authority. Demands for decentralisation?

Probes:
- ❑ Are powers and authority concomitant to responsibilities and functions?
- ❑ Can districts undertake implementation and be held responsible without appropriate authority and powers?
- ❑ Budgets of districts – effects of PFMA
- ❑ Delegations – how they happen
- ❑ What factors are decisions for decentralised powers based on

10. The South African Schools Act (SASA: Sections 20 and 21) appears to grant schools 'self-management' status in terms of the following: the right of SGBs to develop school-level policy on matters such as the language of instruction, extramural activity and religion; the right to set and levy fees; management of the school budget etc.

Should the role of districts be reconsidered in view of the trend towards the 'self-management' of schools

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Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – in context of self-managing schools.

Probes:
- ❑ Change in role of districts over time
- ❑ Is greater school decentralisation accompanied by greater regulation and control
- ❑ Varying approaches to Section 20 and Section 21 schools

11. Where do the programmes and agendas of districts derive from presently? Do districts look to the provincial head office or to schools to derive their programmes? Please explain your answer….

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – looking up or down.

Probes:
- ❑ Is the status quo satisfactory/what needs to change

12. What space exists for districts to interpret and mediate policy? Have there been instances where districts have been able to mediate policy appropriate for their contexts? To what extent do districts develop their own policies? Please give examples. Should more space be given to districts to contextualise policy implementation? Why?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – district autonomy – effectiveness rationale for decentralisation

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Probes:
- ❑ Sources that districts draw on to develop policies and programmes
- ❑ How policies reach schools
- ❑ Timing of policy implementation
- ❑ Co-ordination of policies
- ❑ Contextualisation of curriculum policies

13. What do you view as the key challenges facing districts presently?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – challenges

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Probes:
- ❑ Lack of authority/power
- ❑ Absence of integrated planning between national, provincial and district level
- ❑ The current period of education transformation

- ❏ Resource and capacity issues
- ❏ Ideology
- ❏ Human agency
- ❏ System issues (job descriptions, business processes)
- ❏ Contending priorities
- ❏ Conflicting roles

14. The establishment of decentralised units by the GDE requires district officials to have the capacity to undertake their tasks effectively. Do you agree? What programmes has the GDE initiated for the development of district officials?

> ### Decentralisation implementation – assigning meaning to districts

Probes:
- ❏ Induction programmes
- ❏ Orientation for new policies
- ❏ Skills development (use of skills development budget from the skills levy)

15. How would you describe the relationship between district and provincial level officials?

> ### Decentralisation implementation – assigning meaning to districts

Probes:
- ❏ Collegial
- ❏ Antagonistic
- ❏ Professional (accepting professional autonomy of district officials)
- ❏ Hierarchical/Bureaucratic
- ❏ Demanding and rewarding loyalty as opposed to rewarding initiative, creativity and innovation

16. How do you view the role and activities of the Gauteng Shared Services Centre?

> ### Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – role of districts.

Probes:
- ❏ Appropriate role
- ❏ Has improved service delivery/has potential to do so
- ❏ Not working

17. The recent restructuring processes of the GDE has lead to the boundaries of districts correspond closely with the structures of local government. What/who was the driving force for this initiative? What have been the effects of changing the boundaries of districts?

Stakeholder understandings of the meanings of districts – relationship to local government.

Probes:
- ❑ Role of Premier's office
- ❑ Integrated public service delivery (one-stop shop service)
- ❑ Education vs other considerations in developing boundaries

Summary

The data obtained from the interview will be recorded with the aid of a tape-recorder, and transcribed into text. The text of the data will be submitted to interviewees for verification.

The data will be analysed against existing conceptions of decentralisation, and in the context of the current practice of districts. In addition, the data will be analysed against district-related policy texts of the GDE, as well as compared with responses received by different provincial level interviewees.

A2.6 Interview protocol number 3(a) (1st wave):[101] Director of Tshwane South District

The purpose of this interview schedule is to probe how the Director of the Tshwane South District of the GDE understands the meanings of districts, particularly in relation to the rationale for the establishment of districts, and their roles and functions.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of responses
1. What do you regard as the core purpose of districts? That is, why do districts exist?	❑ support schools ❑ support head office ❑ promote change	Meanings ascribed to districts in terms of purpose
2. Why do you think the GDE deemed it necessary to establish districts? Could the GDE have functioned without districts?	❑ access to schools ❑ reduce clogging ❑ legacy ❑ constitution	Rationale for decentralisation
3. Given the trend towards the 'self-management' of schools, do you think that is necessary to reconsider the role of districts? If so, in what way?	❑ regulatory role ❑ support role	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to 'self-managing schools
4. How do you view the structural relationship between districts and the provincial head office?	❑ administrative arm ❑ extension ❑ autonomous ❑ semi-autonomous	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to the provincial head office
5. How do you view the structural relationship between districts and schools?	❑ hierarchical ❑ collegial	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to schools
6. Why has the GDE not developed a specific policy or legislated the establishment of districts?	❑ administrative action ❑ absence of national directive ❑ lack of capacity/vision ❑ lack of clarity regarding the implications ❑ hesitancy to devolve power/authority	Meanings ascribed to districts in absence of policy
7. What do you think are the reasons why the	❑ integrated service delivery	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to

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[101] The district director was interviewed in two waves.

boundaries of education districts correspond to those of local government structures?	❑ directive from Premier	local government
8. In one sentence, how would you describe GDE districts? What are they?	❑ admin units ❑ management units ❑ support units	Identity of districts

*A*2.7 Interview protocol number 3(b)(2nd wave): District Director

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain an understanding of how the district office functions in relation to its roles and powers.

1. How would you describe the relationship between the district office and the provincial Head office?

   Probes:
   - Structures
   - Nature of relationship
   - Accountability

2. How does the system of delegation of powers to districts work?

   Probes:
   - Legal issues
   - Form of delegation
   - Kinds of powers delegated

3. How does the process of budgeting work in the district office?

   Probes:
   - Budget received
   - Authority on the use of budget
   - Programme budget vs line function budget
   - Relationship between budgeting and planning
   - Involvement of the district office in budgeting processes

4. How are district programmes developed?

   Probes:
   - Influence of PHO
   - Influence of DoE
   - Authority and agency

5. What do you see as the added value of districts?

Summary

The data obtained from the interview will be recorded with the aid of a tape-recorder, and

transcribed into text. The data will be analysed against existing conceptions of decentralisation, and in the context of the absence of official policy on education 'districts'. In addition, the data obtained will be utilised to provide a 'thick' description of the district office.

A2.8 Interview protocol number 4: interview with legal experts

The purpose of these interviews is to obtain insights into the legal status of education districts in South Africa. The interviews will serve to clarify the legal basis of districts, and examine whether the current legal framework is adequate in facilitating the implementation of the roles and functions of districts.

1. How do you understand the current legal position of education districts in South Africa?

   Probes:

   ❑ Constitution
   ❑ Public Service Act

2. The law is silent about how power and authority can be shifted from the provincial level of the system to the district level (except through delegation from one individual to another individual). The concept of 'assignment' is restricted to spheres of government and does not apply to administrative structures. Can this be regarded as a gap in the public service legal framework?

3. Can the district office be held accountable for decisions taken at the PHO?

4. Does the present legal framework allow districts to raise funds? If such a function is decentralised to districts, what implications will it have for the legal status of districts?

   Probes:
   ❑ Can you hold people accountable for functions if legal framework does not exist for decentralisation?

   ❑ Presently – case law is lagging – can the DO be held accountable for certain decisions taken at HO

   ❑ The law does not allow powers to be granted from one layer to another. Assigment is allowed bet two spheres of govt – not from a structure to a sub-structure. Gap in public service legal framework.

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A2.9 *Interview protocol number 5 (1st wave): focus group interviews with IDS and CDS officials*

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain the perceptions, insights and views of IDS officials, and CDS officials of the Tshwane South District of the Gauteng Department of Education (GDE). The focus group discussion aims to illicit how district officials understand the meanings of districts, particularly in terms of how they view the place of districts in the education system.

The interview schedule is drawn up in tabular format to demonstrate clear links between the interview questions, the probes that may be used by the researcher during the course of the interview and the use that of interviewee responses in data analysis.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of responses
1. What do you regard as the core purpose of districts? That is, why do districts exist?	❑ support schools ❑ support head office ❑ promote change	Meanings ascribed to districts in terms of purpose
2. Why do you think the GDE deemed it necessary to establish districts? Could the GDE have functioned without districts?	❑ access to schools ❑ reduce clogging ❑ legacy ❑ constitution	Rationale for decentralisation
3. Given the trend towards the 'self-management' of schools, do you think that is necessary to reconsider the role of districts? If so, in what way?	❑ regulatory role ❑ support role	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to 'self-managing schools
4. How do you view the structural relationship between districts and the provincial head office?	❑ administrative arm ❑ extension ❑ autonomous ❑ semi-autonomous	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to the provincial head office
5. How do you view the structural relationship between districts and schools?	❑ hierarchical ❑ collegial	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to schools

Interview questions	Probes	Use of responses
1. Why has the GDE not developed a specific policy or legislated the establishment of districts?	❑ administrative action ❑ absence of national directive ❑ lack of capacity/vision ❑ lack of clarity regarding the implications ❑ hesitancy to devolve power/authority	Meanings ascribed to districts in absence of policy
2. What do you think are the reasons why the boundaries of education districts correspond to those of local government structures?	❑ integrated service delivery ❑ directive from Premier	Meanings ascribed to districts in relation to local government
3. In one sentence, how would you describe GDE districts? What are they?	❑ admin units ❑ management units ❑ support units	Identity of districts

A2.10 Interview protocol number 6: interviews with school principals

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain the perceptions, insights and views of school principals with regards to their experience of districts. In doing so, the interview will draw out how school principals assign meanings to districts through their practice. In addition the perspectives of principals on the present, and ideal role of districts, will be elicited.

The interview schedule is drawn up in a tabular format to demonstrate clear links between the interview questions, the probes that may be used by the researcher during the course of the interview and the use that of interviewee responses in data analysis.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
1. What has been your experience of districts since the establishment of the GDE in 1994? How has it changed since 1994?	❑ shifts over time ❑ role of districts ❑ strengths/challenges ❑ relationship with districts	How principals understand the meanings of districts through practice and their experience of districts Shifts in school-district relationships since 1994
2. In your experience, what has been the key role of districts since 1994? Do you think that this should change in any way?	❑ support vs accountability ❑ administrative services ❑ policy implementation ❑ policy compliance/regulate ❑ identity	How principals understand the meanings of districts in terms of their experience of districts Principal perspectives on the 'ideal' role of districts
3. Are districts playing the roles you expect of them? If not, why do you think that this is the case?	❑ challenges ❑ expectations of roles	How principals assign meanings of districts in terms of their expectations versus actual practice
4. How would you describe your relationship with districts?	❑ collegial ❑ antagonistic ❑ professional autonomy ❑ bureaucratic/hierarchical	How principals assign meanings of districts in terms of the relationship between schools and districts
5. On what kinds of issues do you interact most often with district officials?	❑ nature of issues ❑ frequency/quality of contact which officials	How principals assign meanings of districts in terms of the nature of interaction between schools and districts
Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
6. Does your interaction with district officials support you in your work as a school principal? In what way?	❑ district response to problems ❑ usefulness of district monitoring	How principals assign meanings of districts in terms of support/non-support provided by districts to principals

		Value-addedness of districts Role of districts
7. Have district officials influenced the way you go about your duties as a principal? In what way?	❑ change in practice, school systems ❑ beneficial/not beneficial	How principals assign meanings to districts in terms of changes in their practices Role of districts
8. How do schools link organisationally with districts?	❑ communication protocols ❑ access to information	Model of school-district interface
9. When you experience problems at your schools, do you expect districts to assist you? What has been your experience of districts in this regard?	❑ which officials ❑ district responsiveness ❑ are other avenues more effective	Capacity of districts to mediate school problems Authority of districts Decentralisation
10. Do you think schools that have Section 21 status in terms of SASA require a different district approach as compared to schools that have Section 20 status? In what way?	❑ support ❑ regulation/monitoring ❑ accountability	Role of districts Value-addedness of districts
11. The present geographical boundaries of districts correspond closely with those of local government structures. Have you experienced any changes in terms of broader public service delivery since the restructuring processes of the GDE?	❑ health ❑ security ❑ water, electricity ❑ access to sports facilities	The relationship between education districts and local government
12. What has been your experience of the administration services provided by the Gauteng Shared Services Centre?	❑ greater/less efficiency	The GSSC – effects of restructuring
13. Will your schools be affected if there were no district offices, and all links were made directly with the provincial head office? In what way?	❑ administrative blockages ❑ economies of scale ❑ ease of access to information/resources ❑ resolution of problems	Rationale for decentralisation Value-addedness of districts

*A*2.12 Interview protocol number 7: interviews with school teachers

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain the perceptions, insights and views of school teachers regarding their experience of districts. In doing so, the interview will draw out how school teachers assign meanings to districts in practice. In addition, the interview ims to illicit teacher perspectives on what the present role of districts is, and what they, ideally would like it to be.

The interview schedule is drawn up in tabular format to demonstrate clear links between the interview questions, the probes that may be used by the researcher during the course of the interview and the use that of interviewee responses in data analysis.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
1. On what kinds of issues do you interact most often with district officials?	❑ nature of issues ❑ frequency/quality of contact ❑ which officials ❑ adequacy of contact ❑ where (classroom, school, w/shops)	School-district interactive spaces
2. What has been your experience of district officials since the establishment of the GDE in 1994? How has this changed since 1994?	❑ shifts over time ❑ strengths/challenges ❑ relationship with districts	How teachers understand the meanings of districts through their experience of districts
3. Has your interaction with district officials supported you in your work as a teacher? Please explain your answer.	❑ district response to problems ❑ usefulness of district ❑ monitoring	Support vs accountability Authority of districts to solve problems
4. Have district officials influenced the way you go about your duties as a teacher? In what way?	❑ change in classroom practice ❑ change in admin systems ❑ beneficial/not beneficial	Impact of districts on the work of teachers – value addeddness/role
5. When you experience problems with curriculum issues, do you expect districts to assist you? What has been your experience of districts in this regard?	❑ which officials ❑ district responsiveness ❑ are other avenues more effective	Capacity of districts to mediate curriculum problems. Role of districts.
Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
6. How would you describe your relationship with district officials?	❑ collegial ❑ antagonistic ❑ professional autonomy	How teachers assign meanings of districts in terms of their relationship

		bureaucratic/hierarchical	with district officials
7.	What do you think should be the key roles of districts?	❑ support vs accountability ❑ administrative services ❑ policy implementation ❑ policy compliance/regulate ❑ identity	Role of districts
8.	Are district officials playing the roles you expect of them? If not, why do you think that this is the case?	❑ challenges ❑ expectations of roles	Discrepancy between expectations and actual practice
9.	Teacher development is an important ongoing activity, key to the work of teachers. What are the most effective ways in which teachers can learn? Please explain your answer.	❑ university ❑ district workshops ❑ networking with teachers ❑ on-site support	Role of district officials
10.	What has been your experience of the administration services provided by the Gauteng Shared Services Centre?	❑ greater/less efficiency	Decentralisation effects

Summary

The data obtained from the interview will be recorded with the aid of a tape-recorder, and transcribed into text. The data will be analysed in terms of how teachers understand and experience the role of districts, and thereby assign meanings to districts. The data will be corroborated with responses received from other categories of stakeholders that have been interviewed.

A2.13 Interview protocol number 8: interview with Examinations Officer

The purpose of this interview schedule is to obtain information on the role played districts in administrating matriculation and other examinations.

The interview schedule is drawn up in tabular format to demonstrate clear links between the interview questions, the probes that may be used by the researcher during the course of the interview and the use that of interviewee responses in data analysis.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
1. What is the role of the examination unit in the district?	❑ support schools ❑ support Head office ❑ support DoE ❑ implement policy	Role of the district office Support vs Pressure
2. What kinds of issues do you deal with in this unit?	❑ administration ❑ monitoring ❑ Liaison with parents	Role of districts
3. What kinds of activities do you actually engage in?	❑ school visits ❑ logistics ❑ liaison with schools	Role of districts
4. What does your typical week at work look like?	❑ meetings ❑ administrative work ❑ Liaison with schools	Role of districts
5. What is the nature of the relationship between your unit and the PHO?	❑ administrative arm ❑ extension of PHO ❑ autonomous ❑ semi-autonomous	Level of decentralisation
6. How do you view your relationship with schools?	❑ collegial ❑ antagonistic ❑ professional autonomy ❑ bureaucratic/hierarchical	Relationship between schools and districts
7. What do you see as the key challenges facing districts?	❑ resources ❑ relationship issues	Challenges facing districts

*A*2.14 Interview protocol number 9: interview with the District Deputy Director

The purpose of this interview schedule is to illicit information on the role of district in the administration of human resource issues in schools.

The interview schedule is drawn up in tabular format to demonstrate clear links between the interview questions, the probes that may be used by the researcher during the course of the interview and the use that of interviewee responses in data analysis.

Interview questions	Probes	Use of question
1. How do you see the role of the HRM Unit ?	❑ in relation to schools ❑ in relation to the PHO ❑ in relation to other units in the district office	Role of districts Support vs accountability relationship with schools and PHO
2. What kinds of issues do you deal with?	❑ staffing of schools ❑ labour issues ❑ conditions of service	Role of district office Support to schools
3. What kinds of activities do you actually engage in?	❑ school liaison ❑ school visits	Role of district Relationship with schools
4. What does your typical week look like?	❑ meetings (with whom/where) ❑ Liaison (with whom) ❑ Statistics (how)	Role of districts
5. How do you view your relationship with schools?	❑ hierarchical ❑ collegial	Relationship with schools
6. What do you see as the key challenges facing districts?	❑ resources ❑ relationship issues ❑ structural issues	Chllenges facing districts

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Appendix 3: District profile

Institutional and staff profile of Tshwane South District as at July 2005

Area of information	Quantity
Total number of schools in the district	226*
Number of primary schools in the district	136
Number of secondary schools in the district	90
Number of Independent schools in the district	48
Number of ABET Centres in the district	6 (35 sites)
Number of ECD centres in the district	52
Total number of teachers (Post levels 1 and 2) in the district	4,854
Number of primary school teachers in the district	2,310
Number of secondary school teachers in the district	2,544
Total number of staff in the Tshwane South District office	238
Total number of CS staff in the district office	108
Total number PS staff in the district office	130
Number of IDSOs in the district office	13
Number of post level 3 curriculum support staff (ECD)	08
Number of post level 3 curriculum support staff (Intersen)	14
Number of post level 3 curriculum support staff (FET)	24
Number of ESS staff (including 13 psychologists)	20

Source: Information obtained from EMIS and OFSTED
* The total number of schools excludes independent schools.